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'Wilful Longing to God'
A Lacanian Reading of Julian of Norwich's Texts

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'Wilful Longing to God': A Lacanian Reading of Julian of Norwich's Texts

**Wendy Gore
PhD Thesis**

Thesis Abstract

This thesis examines particular aspects and elements within the texts of Julian of Norwich, in light of certain of the tenets and concepts of Jacques Lacan, in order to attempt to offer a psychoanalytical reading of these facets of Julian's works. Specifically, this thesis addresses Julian's oft-evoked longing for a God who appears to manifest in several different guises—which appear in a recurring, non-linear and even dialectical fashion throughout her accounts—in terms of Lacan's formulations on desire for the Thing, or an intense yearning for an elusive quantity that seems to rest within an object, yet which morphs or jumps into another object entirely, the moment the subject draws near.

As part of this Lacanian reading of certain aspects within Julian's works, I examine the varying perceptions of the sought divinity which the texts portray and the perspectives or authorial voices from which they are offered in light of Lacan's conceptions of anamorphosis, the gaze and subject as object. Additionally Julian's encounters with and textual descriptions of mortality are looked at through the prism of Lacan's notion of the 'space between two deaths.'

This thesis draws to a close by examining Julian's discovery that the sought quantity resides within her own soul in light of Lacan's concept of desire for desire. Finally, after exploring, throughout this thesis, how the formulations of Jacques Lacan can be useful in illuminating elements within Julian's works, this thesis concludes by investigating whether there is some benefit to be gained from staging a dialogue between certain aspects of Julian's texts and specific elements of the psychoanalytic theory of Lacan.

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Introduction: Viewing Certain Aspects of Julian of Norwich's Works in a Lacanian Light

In this thesis I will examine various elements within the late-medieval mystical texts of Julian of Norwich through the prism of some of the twentieth-century psychoanalytical theoretical formulations advanced by Jacques Lacan.

Specifically, I would like to offer an interpretation of Julian's texts that centres on Lacan's concept of desire for the Thing, which he discussed in great depth in his series of lectures presented between November 1959 and July 1960 in Paris and which have been translated into English and published as *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*. This Lacanian seminar is also of interest because in it he discusses medieval courtly love, Augustine's *Confessions* and medieval mysticism, all topics which, to a greater or lesser extent, have some relevance to Julian's texts. As part of this reading of Julian's texts centring on Lacan's theory of desire, I will also be deploying Lacanian concepts, such as *l'entre deux morts* or the space between two deaths, which he discussed extensively in *Seminar VII*, and anamorphosis and the gaze, which he introduced and explored in 1964, in a series of lectures that have been published in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*,

The reason that I intend to employ an approach that utilises specific Lacanian concepts to look at certain aspects of Julian's behaviour and stated beliefs and motivation is in order to help stage a mutually informing dialogue between two equally unfamiliar, and at times arcane bodies of thought—the visionary experiences and complex mystical theology of the fourteenth-century

Julian and the dense, intricate and sometimes opaque theory of the twentieth-century Lacan.

The ability of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory to help situate and explicate medieval thought and behaviour in general, as well as specific areas within Julian's texts, for postmodern audiences stems from its fundamental premise about the existence of a human unconscious, as revealed by desire. Erin Labbie states of this element of Lacanian theory: 'As the primary means of knowing the unconscious, desire is foundational to the epistemological map of the subject.'¹ This concept of the unconscious, whilst it may be affected by historical circumstances, such as culture, religion and gender, nevertheless is something that, according to Lacan, all beings possess, whether in the present day or in the Middle Ages. As Erin Labbie describes this historically based, yet transhistorical, Lacanian formulation:

The unconscious, structured as it is *like a language* is also, therefore, bound to and created by culture. Independent unconscious systems, each subject's different psyche, are unique and located in particularities of temporality and geography (as well as the race, class, sex trio). The unconscious understood as an abstract, conceptual entity, however, *is* precisely transhistorical in that it exists in each speaking subject throughout time, whether there is a name for it, the unconscious, or not.²

¹ Erin Felicia Labbie. *Lacan's Medievalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2006), p. 20.

² Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 9.

It is precisely because, in Lacanian theory, all human beings, regardless of time or place, are posited to possess this universal unconscious, which nevertheless displays differences due to historical situational factors, that Lacan's concepts can shed light on precisely that which separates the postmodern experience from the premodern, and that which unites it. Lacanian theory thus enables the postmodern commentator to point out what might actually be a common, even shared experience, one that only seems wholly dissimilar due to the differences in experience, practice and outlook inscribed by historical conditions, such as religious belief or cultural customs.

In addition, I intend, in the final analysis, to suggest that the very applicableness of certain aspects of Lacanian theory to some of Julian's ideas and conclusions illustrates not only the relevance of his concepts on desire to medieval mystical thought and practice, but also perhaps, therefore, to certain human behaviours across the ages.

As mentioned above, the bulk of this thesis will focus on exploring specific aspects within Julian's texts, such as her mobile implementation of imagery, concepts, perspectives and spiritual modes, as well as her flirtations with death, against the backlight of Lacan's overarching conception of human desire. In particular, I will look at Julian's ideas and motivations—all of which she attributes to an overwhelming and unrelenting devotion and longing for an entity she designates as God—in light of Lacan's formulation of desire for the Thing.³ Lacan succinctly sums up his thesis on what he considers to be

³ For a comprehensive look at Lacan's formulation on desire for the Thing, which will be discussed in much greater detail in the first chapter of this thesis, see: Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Brunner-Routledge, 1996), pp. 204-5; Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian*

foundational desire, when he says, 'at the heart of man's destiny is the *Ding*, the *causa*... it is the *causa pathomen*, the *cause* of the most fundamental human passion.'⁴ By looking at Julian's self-stated concepts and choices in terms of this formulation of Lacan's, it will be possible to discern a commonality between the behaviour and motivations of a medieval mystic, driven by desire for God, and that displayed by more modern subjects, impelled by longing for the Thing, in the form of an object or series of metonymic objects, which Lacan referred to as *objet petit a*.⁵

According to Lacan's conception, the Thing represents, for a desiring subject, the answer to all that s/he is lacking, the one indispensable element necessary to restore him or her to wholeness. As Teresa Brennan states, to Lacan, the subject 'managed to conflate its *objet petit a* with the big A, the *Autre* or Other,'⁶ or the Thing which is most desired. Thus, Lacan's formulation of desire for the Thing, which can appear to manifest in *objet petit a*, provides a means to discuss Julian's desire for God in terms of her own yearning for an indispensable element or experience necessary to render her complete. Indeed, Lacan claims that the sought Thing actually points at and promises to fill a lack or gap that formed at the centre of each human psyche upon the subject's entry

Subject: Between Language and Jouissance (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 95-6; Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 105; Slavoj Žižek, 'Courtly Love, or Woman as Thing', in *The Žižek Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Wright and Edmond Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 148-73, (p. 151); and Mario Vrbancnic. *The Lacanian Thing: Psychoanalysis, Postmodern Culture, and Cinema* (Amherst, NY: Cambria Press, 2011).

⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1997), p. 97.

⁵ For more on *objet petit a*, see: Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 124-6 and Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 11.

⁶ Teresa Brennan, *History After Lacan* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 66.

into signification.⁷ Of this formulation, which he suggests is fundamental to Lacan's thought, Slavoj Žižek says:

the best description of Lacan's central project [is] that of a *critique of pure desire*, where the term "critique" is to be understood in its precise Kantian sense: maintaining the gap that forever separates every empirical ("pathological") object of desire from its "impossible" object-cause whose place has to remain empty.⁸

Thus desire, in this Lacanian sense, is that which impels a subject to try and capture that one object or Thing which would fill in or restore what appears to be most lacking in one's being.

By utilising an approach that equates Julian's sought God with Lacan's desired Thing, this thesis is able to shift attention away from (what could seem to postmodern audiences to be) Julian's particularly premodern faith in an inscrutable and unverifiable entity, simply to focus instead on Julian's radical desire itself in all its facets. In other words, this thesis will attempt to illumine Julian's notion of longing for God in terms of Lacan's conception of desire for the Thing or *Das Ding*,⁹ since both of these forms of desire are directed towards

⁷ Lacan's conception of gap at the centre of human psychical experience that forms in the early childhood will be discussed in great detail and compared and contrasted to the aspects of Julian's texts that it is meant to illumine, in chapter one of this thesis. For more on this topic, see: Fink, *Lacanian Subject*, pp. 114-5, Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 34-5 and Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 100.

⁸ Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 507.

⁹ I am here including the German term *Das Ding*, because Lacan's formulation on this topic was in direct response to Freud's concept of the Thing or *Das Ding*, as discussed, in: 'Project for a New Scientific Psychology', in *The Standard*

that which is coveted by the subject, to a relentless and unstinting degree, as the one factor that will bring her or his life to completion of fulfilment.

Basically, when distilled to their motivational essence, Julian's accounts all stem from and revolve around a stated desire, a relentless longing for a singular goal—the apprehension of her beloved God, in whatever form this may take. As she herself puts it:

For oure kindly wille is to have God, and the good wille of
God is to have us, and we may never blin of willing ne of
loving tille we have him in fulhede of joy. And than we may no
more wille (*Revelation*, 6.49-51).¹⁰

Clearly this quotation declares Julian's unyielding and singular desire for God, in the guise of the Christian versions of this deity which prevailed in the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries in Western Europe. Although Julian's texts continue to contribute to Christian thought and discourse in the twenty-first century, still the concept of an omnipotent transcendental divinity might not be something that is as universally acceptable or comprehensible in the multi-cultural, cross-ethnic and often sceptical modern period, as it was in the era in which Julian wrote her texts.¹¹ Therefore, it is helpful to suggest, with the aid of Lacan's conception of desire for the Thing, an alternative meaning for or

Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 1, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 281-397.

¹⁰ All references to Julian's writings will be taken from *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and A Revelation of Love*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006) and will be cited by section/chapter and line.

¹¹ Although there are critics who disagree that religious belief was as hegemonic in the late Middle Ages as is usually perceived. See: John H. Arnold, *Belief and Unbelief in Medieval Europe* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), p. 217.

way of looking at what it was that Julian was actually coveting.¹² Labbie articulates one way in which Lacanian theory does this when she speaks of how Lacan ‘revive[s] God in the presence of the Other, the voice of desire and the unconscious.’¹³

However, whilst Lacan’s psychoanalytic formulation of desire for the Thing might help to illumine Julian’s self-described longing or love for God in a manner that can be better understood by those who no longer accept, as Lacan, himself, claimed he did not, the existence of a divine entity,¹⁴ it does not cancel out or negate the fact that Julian herself would characterise her yearning, in terms of devotion to a divine beloved. And it is not meant to do so.

¹² For more on the possibility of the Lacanian Thing being somehow able to represent or take the place of the traditional notion of God in Western religion, see: Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Reinhard Lupton, ‘The Subject of Religion: Lacan and the Ten Commandments’, *Diacritics*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), pp. 71-97, (pp. 85-6).

¹³ Labbie, *Lacan’s Medievalism*, p. 30.

¹⁴ Although Lacan, himself, repeatedly denied a belief in God or the divine, there is evidence to suggest that his self-described atheism was not as unambiguous as he wished to portray it. Certainly it appears that his unbelief was rooted in belief. As Bruce Holsinger states, ‘Like Bataille... (and, one suspects, the preponderance of twentieth-century non-clerical French intellectuals), Lacan’s youthful anti-Catholicism coexisted alongside an intensive and longstanding absorption of the premodern religious cultures that made it possible’ (Bruce Holsinger, *The Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p 61). In fact, Lacan’s theory of desire is based around a faith in something or some Thing that curiously resembles God, yet which he denies is in any way related to divinity. Labbie describes this Lacanian phenomenon as, ‘a perverted form of belief in the combination of faith and reason, in love and being, that exists without God as the primary cause... a realism wherein the unconscious substitutes for the absence-presence of God’ (Labbie, *Lacan’s Medievalism*, p. 18). So, Lacan’s atheism was perhaps not as uncomplicated as he asserted. Indeed, Labbie states unequivocally that, ‘Like an understanding of or belief in God, the study of the unconscious requires a certain degree of faith. Despite his overt claims that God does not exist, Lacan is not an atheist, and he supplements love and desire for the singular causality of a Christian God even while he engages in a discussion of God’s parallel to the unconscious’ (Labbie, *Lacan’s Medievalism*, p. 29).

Yet psychoanalytic theory, whether Freudian or Lacanian, can be helpful to literary critical studies that deal with issues of God or religion by providing an explanation of what motivates faith, and belief in a transcendent or metaphysical power within a human psyche. By situating God or divinity within the purview of the subject's own inherent desire and longing which arises as the byproduct of a foundational phase within the development of the psyche, a psychoanalytical approach allows scholars to discuss belief and faith, as displayed in the characters of the texts they explore, from a more comprehensible perspective. It accomplishes this in that it enables critics to examine religious belief or spiritual seeking in terms of observable human nature and experience, rather than as, for instance, the result of a collective, shared societal or cultural adherence to magical or delusionary thinking.

Freud originated the psychoanalytical position on religion which he classified as an illusion formed by the remnants of an infantile sense of unity or the 'shrunk residue of a much more inclusive—indeed an all-embracing—feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world around it.'¹⁵ Lacan evolved this psychoanalytical viewpoint on religion as essentially illusory through his conception of it as a tool to aid the subject in asking oneself and possibly answering 'the question of existence in the

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 15. For more on Freud's views on religion, particularly his dismissal of it as illusory, see also: James J. DiCenso, 'Symbolism and Subjectivity: A Lacanian Approach to Religion', *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 74, No. 1 (Jan., 1994), pp. 45-64, (p. 45); James J. DiCenso, *The Other Freud: Religion, Culture and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge), 1999, p. 41 and Clayton Crockett, 'On Sublimation: The Significance of Psychoanalysis for the Study of Religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (Dec., 2000), pp. 837-55, (pp. 839-41).

world'¹⁶—by giving the thinking subject a sort of apparatus or means with which to explain some of the more mystifying and ultimately inexplicable circumstances, situations and occurrences, such as the inevitability of death, that constitute human experience. It is possibly conclusions such as this one which led Lee Patterson to describe Lacan, somewhat derisively, as 'more truly a metaphysician (or theologian) than a psychologist.'¹⁷ Yet, despite Patterson's assessment, Lacan's estimation of religion as a helpful tool for those attempting to situate themselves in and find meaning from life apparently did not render this avowedly atheistic psychoanalytical theorist religious or instil any faith in him in a divine power or transcendent being. However, as pointed out previously in this chapter, in note 14, despite Lacan's oft-professed atheism, there were nevertheless signs in his theoretical concepts that suggested that his atheism was somewhat less pure than he attempted to portray it. Indeed, Labbie shines a spotlight on an area in Lacanian theory in which Lacan's proclaimed atheism becomes somewhat cloudy, if not necessarily overtly suspect, when she says: 'The substitution of the unconscious for God in the scene of desire creates difficulty in understanding precisely where Lacan stands on the issue of and relation between knowledge and the divine, as well as the divine and desire'¹⁸ Furthermore, as Labbie points out, Lacan, himself, actually acknowledged the potential shakiness of his claims to utter non-belief. She states, 'Recognizing the problem within his comparison of the experience

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 265. For more on Lacan's approach to religion, see: DiCenso, 'Symbolism and Subjectivity', pp. 45-64.

¹⁷ Lee Patterson, 'Chaucer's Pardoner on the Couch: Psyche and Clio in Medieval Literary Studies', *Speculum*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (2001), pp. 638-680, (p. 647).

¹⁸ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 136.

of *jouissance* with the experience of the mystic [Lacan] says, “you are all going to be convinced that I believe in God.”¹⁹ Despite all of this, Lacan consistently maintained that he did *not*, indeed, believe in God.

It is precisely Lacan’s oft-stated lack of belief in God which makes his formulation on desire for the Thing—with the Thing occupying the space normally reserved for God, or ‘the mythical creator *ex nihilo*’²⁰—so useful in illuminating the underlying causes, motivations and expressions of Julian’s faith in or desire for God to postmodern audiences which may be more sceptical of, or may simply be less familiar with, what might drive some of the more intense forms of late-medieval devotion, such as Julian’s self-reported prayer for a deathly illness.²¹ Later in this thesis, I will suggest that Julian’s success in navigating what Lacan conceived of as desire for the Thing, her ability essentially to follow it up to and beyond the very limits he prescribes and proscribes, actually might have the power retroactively to close some technically open loops in Lacanian theory.

Debates about the Place of Psychoanalytic Theories in Literary Criticism

At this point, however, it will be beneficial to address certain issues within literary critical circles that the approach I have outlined above—the utilisation

¹⁹ Labbie, *Lacan’s Medievalism*, p. 136. In this example, Labbie is quoting from: Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XX*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 1998), p. 77.

²⁰ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 121.

²¹ That this sort of entreaty in order to gain greater affinity with the suffering Christ was somewhat commonplace in late-medieval devotional practice can be found in: Annie Sutherland, ‘Julian of Norwich and the Liturgy’, in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 88-98, (p. 88).

of Lacanian psychoanalytical theories to help render certain aspects of Julian's texts more accessible to postmodern ways of thought²²—might touch upon or activate. I am specifically referring to the still ongoing, though waning, objections of certain scholars who worry about and reject what they deem as the artificial universalising or totalising of human behaviour at the cost of historical accuracy or specificity, as well as the related and more targeted concerns of those critics who fear introducing anachronistic ideas or behaviours into historicist critical studies.

When using psychoanalytical theory as a methodological approach in the literary critical examination of medieval, or indeed any, texts one has to be cognizant of and sensitive to a set of longstanding scholarly disputes regarding the validity and/or efficacy of utilising psychoanalytic tenets to look at works from a different era. L.O. Aranye Fradenburg sums up the crux of this methodological debate:

The relations between psychoanalytic and historicist approaches to medieval culture have, of course, been strained. Psychoanalysis is sometimes regarded as ahistorical and

²² In this vein, it is interesting to note that, according to Labbie's study on Lacan, his theory of desire for the Thing is intricately bound up with his interpretations of medieval texts. See: Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*. This might give credence to my suggestion that perhaps Lacan's formulation on desire for the Thing not only finds much fertile ground in that era, but that it could also aid in translating some of the motivations, thoughts or behaviours somewhat unique to that period—which may be unfamiliar to modern readers—to those who might be more familiar with psychoanalytical theory and Lacanian reasoning.

exclusively focused on individual subjectivity, despite the fact that history is crucial to the thought of Freud and Lacan.²³

Thus, those critics who adhere to a more strictly historicist outlook on how literary texts produced within a certain historical era ought to be studied and interpreted have tended to look askance at the utilisation of psychoanalytical theory because of the belief that it totalises human behaviour at the expense of examining or understanding the actual historically accurate mindsets and conditions portrayed in these texts. As Lee Patterson emphatically puts it, in his polemic against the use of psychoanalytical theory in medieval literary criticism:

[The] rich psychological knowledge—gained both empirically in our lives and by demonstration in the books we read—must be protected from the various universalist models now on offer. Until such models can command universal scientific authority—and the Freudian model is heading fast in the opposite direction—their potential explanatory and descriptive value is far outweighed by their absolutism.²⁴

Here Patterson is clearly giving voice to the contention, still, to some degree, held by many scholars in the medieval field, as well as in literary criticism in general, that psychoanalytic theories rely on the essentialism of certain ideas on the universality of subjective thought, subject-formation, psychic structures and so on. Patterson, and those medievalists who, according to Labbie, 'continue to resist psychoanalysis because it is seen as ahistorical or

²³ L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love: Psychoanalysis, Historicism, Chaucer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2002), p. 11.

²⁴ Patterson, 'Pardoner', p. 678.

transhistorical,'²⁵ often also attribute their rejection of theory to its perceived status as unscientific. The danger in this, according to Patterson and the line of debate he is championing, is that the psychoanalytic critic, through the application or attribution of supposedly universal tenets of thought to medieval characters, runs the risk of introducing ideas, motivations and modes of thought into medieval texts which might not have been known or familiar to those who lived and wrote in the Middle Ages. Anne Middleton concurs with Patterson's belief in the corrosive and retarding possibilities posed by psychoanalysis' allegedly universalising approach, when she complains about the effects of 'imported critical paradigms and the transferred master narratives of other disciplines'²⁶ on medieval studies. In this comment she voices a similar concern about what, from a historicist viewpoint, appears to be a virtually inescapable artificiality inherent in applying modern theories or methodologies, such as psychoanalysis, to the field of medieval literary criticism.

That Patterson, for one, believes that Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism, in particular, belongs within what he sees as this negative trend towards totalisation at the cost of historical accuracy founded on empirical evidence, can be found in comments such as these: 'Lacan presented his work as... universalist'²⁷ and 'Lacan shows little interest in empirical validation in

²⁵ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 9.

²⁶ Anne Middleton, 'Medieval Studies', in *Redrawing the Boundaries: The Transformation of English and American Literary Studies*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1992), pp. 12-41 (p. 15).

²⁷ Patterson, 'Pardoner', p. 646.

preference to unconstrained theorizing.’²⁸ Thus, Lacan’s psychoanalytic methodology, as well as his conceptions, receive fire from the historicist literary critical point-of-view due to their purported essentialism borne of unrestrained theorising, devoid of proper attention to historical accuracy.

However, despite there being a case for the need to be vigilant about not glossing over historical conditions and facts when using universal ideas about human thought or behaviour, it seems that some unfair or inaccurate impressions of Lacanian theory may have arisen from a tendency to slot his work into a category within which it does not necessarily fit. As Brennan states:

The prejudice against general “totalizing” theories has contributed to a serious misreading of Lacan in which he is too readily assimilated to the poststructuralist grain. The existence of the historical side of Lacan’s theory of the Imaginary, let alone its implications, has been ignored or at best mentioned in passing.²⁹

Therefore it would seem that, in the cause of condemning psychoanalytic criticism for its unnaturally totalising effects on historical aspects within texts, historicist critics have at times universalised their perception or portrayal of Lacanian theory in order to suit the requirements of their argument. Because, in fact, as Brennan points out, Lacan’s theories did have a specific historical element to them, due to his contention that there is an age of the ego which

²⁸ Patterson, ‘Pardoner’, p. 655.

²⁹ Brennan, *History After Lacan*, p. 7. For more about the misconception regarding Lacan’s essentialism to the detriment of historicism, see: Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Jacques Lacan: Psychoanalysis and the Subject of Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 16.

began in the seventeenth century.³⁰ Since this assertion, which is key to his development of many of his most core concepts, indicates that Lacanian theory was indeed aware of and, in some cases, receptive to, respectful of and even influenced by historical realities, it would seem inaccurate to categorise it as ahistorical or completely reliant on essentialist or universalist principles to the detriment of the actual, empirical facts of any given period.

Additionally, as Labbie states about the mode of thought and practice within which Lacan's concepts are grounded:

Psychoanalysis is integrally tethered to a consideration of the way that the subject is formed in relation to culture and language. The speaking subject is always materially bound by way of language to a given historical context. This means that it cannot be ahistorical in any case; the subject is always situated historically and culturally.³¹

Thus, whilst Lacan might posit the existence of certain fundamental and shared cross-generational, cross-cultural and cross-gendered human developmental experiences and resultant mental states, he is very careful to situate them within the historical and cultural milieux within which each subject lived. By doing this, Lacan actually helps to verify his theory, rather than diminish it. As Labbie explains:

The unconscious is always already within the speaking subject.

As an aspect of being, then, the unconscious is a real universal.

The only way that we can know this is through symptoms that

³⁰ Brennan, *History After Lacan*, pp. 3-4.

³¹ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 9.

emerge within experience, and so the unconscious as a universal reasserts into particular modes and moments of being.³²

Therefore, it is only by pointing out the effects that specific eras and circumstances have upon the subject's unconscious or psyche (as revealed by his or her approach to desire) that Lacan's formulations are able to be accurately explored and tested, in terms of observable human behaviour.

Ironically, despite his attempts to gather and display empirical evidence for his formulations on desire through the observation and examination of behaviour or thought displayed in literary texts, such as, famously, those on medieval courtly love, Lacan's methodology and findings are still accused of being unscientific. Labbie states that, paradoxically, Lacanian theory, 'often risks being perceived as universalizing or ahistorical because of its precise effort to analyze the subject in light of history (world history, the subject's history).'³³ Far from attempting artificially and indiscriminately to apply theory to human thought and actions across the centuries, therefore, Lacan is attempting to discover and convey how actual human ideas and behaviour, as manifested in critical texts, prove or disprove his conceptions.

In order truly to accomplish this feat, Lacan must respect historical conditions, rather than try to gloss them over, ignore them or suppress them. Indeed, in *Seminar VII*, when Lacan wishes to examine the nature of desire for the Thing—a concept fundamental to his theory of the unconscious, human development and behaviour—he approaches the topic through an extended

³² Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 9.

³³ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 19.

discussion of medieval courtly love poetry. In this discourse, Lacan is careful to situate the troubadours and their desired ladies (the coveted, yet always denied, and somehow faintly profane and destructive objects, who represent *Das Ding*) to whom they address their poems, within their specific, historical milieux—the eleventh to the early thirteenth centuries. In fact, Lacan devotes quite a bit of discussion to a detailed introduction of certain historical figures—such as Eleanour of Aquitaine, William of Montpellier and the poet, Guillaume de Poitiers, whose credentials Lacan provides, naming him as the seventh Count of Poitiers and the ninth Duke of Aquitaine³⁴—and the circumstances of the day, including the conditions for women.³⁵ However, whilst acknowledging that the examples of the troubadours and the desire that their poetry expresses, stem from a very different set of circumstances, which relied upon certain conditions that existed only in a very specific past, Lacan also uses their cases to posit a non-historically contingent concept about the role of the forbidden and somehow terrifyingly empty feminine at the heart of desire for the Thing,³⁶ which though perhaps originating in the medieval still lingers, in a culturally and temporally adjusted form, in the modern era.

Further evidence that Lacan follows an approach that relies on the alterity of past to help identify similarities across time periods, and that he even reaps positive rewards from this towards the viability of his theory, can be seen in Labbie's assessment that:

Lacan's view of the universals and the historicity of the subject, the unconscious, and desire are quite sensitive to the dangers

³⁴ Lacan, *Ethics*, pp. 146-8.

³⁵ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 147.

³⁶ Lacan, *Ethics*, pp. 150-1.

of universalization and idealization. This is not to say, however, that the epistemological cuts distinguishing premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity stand up to the force of the real of the unconscious. Rather, the unconscious as a real category is subject to these external epistemological changes, but it survives these alterations as it exceeds and evades the process of conscious registering.³⁷

Clearly, as Labbie points out above, it is only through the comparison of human behaviour and thought across time periods, and taking into account the very real differences in societal, cultural and gender circumstances, as well as their effects upon the subject, that the universal or transhistorical elements of the Lacanian formulations on the unconscious and desire, are able to be demonstrated, tested and possibly verified. So, once again, it is through adhering to certain historicist standards—such as witnessed above in his in-depth situating of the subjects who help him to posit his desired *Ding* in the verifiable Middle Ages—and avoiding the application of totalising modes of thought or universalising features that Lacan is able to explore, build and attempt to prove the validity of his theory.

Regardless of this, as a general precept, whether or not Lacan's conceptions recognised or valued historical accuracy, the fact remains that it is still possible for one who is implementing a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach in an attempt to look at certain corollaries in behaviour and thoughts as described in texts from other periods or places—such as the Middle Ages, for example—to do so without sacrificing historicist verisimilitude. As Brennan

³⁷ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 19.

puts it: 'to recognize that there is a more general trend at work is not to deny the significance of the local.'³⁸ Employing psychoanalytical tenets to help explain certain ideas or aspects within texts which may seem foreign or outdated to modern ways of thought or reasoning does not preclude situating these elements, ideas and described behaviours within the historical period, the exact cultural and societal milieux, to which they belonged and from which they were formed. In fact, it is by incorporating both the psychoanalytic critical tenets and the historicist attention to local detail and accuracy, that the clearest picture can be formed of the motivations, ideas and conclusions put forth in texts, especially texts such as Julian's which concern concepts and motives which might on the surface seem unfamiliar or foreign to certain modes of contemporary thought, belief or unbelief.

In addition to the dispute between critics who are concerned that the totalising effect of psychoanalytical theories might distort or misrepresent historical truths and those literary critics who find value in utilising psychoanalytic concepts in order, among other things, better to explain the motives and thoughts of those from a different age, there is also another very related concern which historicist scholars have had in regard to the utilisation of psychoanalytic theories in literary criticism. Basically there are those critics who have worried that psychoanalytical criticism, when applied to texts from other periods, such as the medieval, might have the effect of compromising the alterity of the past and in some way thus rendering it too similar to modern times by the introduction of anachronistic ideas or viewpoints. Fradenburg highlights this historicist concern, from the psychoanalytic perspective, when

³⁸ Brennan, *History After Lacan*, p. 6.

she speaks out against, 'certain strains of [medieval] historicism... that still insist on the radical alterity of the past, the incommunication of epistemes, and the uselessness of generalizing about the "local" and the "specific".'³⁹ Whilst Fradenburg's characterisation of certain historicist positions in this manner might be too uncompromising, I believe it is fair to suggest that some scholars would be wary of psychoanalytic criticism's ability to introduce or superimpose postmodern modes of thought and concepts onto the writings and ideas of another period in history.

Sarah Kay verbalises this worry, with specific regard to Lacanian criticism and medieval literary readings, when she states, 'Medievalists often resist using Lacan to inform their readings on the grounds that it is anachronistic to apply his views to the Middle Ages.'⁴⁰ In a broader vein, Elizabeth Scala discusses what she refers to as 'the general resistance to psychoanalysis in medieval English literary studies.'⁴¹ She describes this historicist resistance, which in this specific case she attributes to David Aers, as stemming from the contention that,

Not only does psychoanalysis emerge out of (and thus strictly pertain to) modern industrial society, its very concerns and priorities of infantile and familial experience also would be illegible to medieval subjects. Psychoanalysis forms an

³⁹ L. O. Aranye Fradenburg, 'Analytical Survey 2: We Are Not Alone: Psychoanalytical Medievalism', in *New Medieval Literatures*, Vol. 2, ed. Rita Copeland, David Lawton and Wendy Scase (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), pp. 249-76, (p. 262).

⁴⁰ Sarah Kay, *Courtly Contradictions: The Emergence of the Literary Object in the Twelfth Century* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 144.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Scala, 'Historicists and Their Discontents: Reading Psychoanalytically in Medieval Studies', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2002), pp. 108-31, p. 111.

analytical language absolutely unintelligible to a medieval individual. And it is such intelligibility to the culture under study that forms the basis of “responsible” historical research.⁴²

Thus, because psychoanalytic theories have arisen from modern times and modern concerns, this historicist objection to psychoanalytical criticism holds, it would have been impossible for a medieval subject to have understood them. Yet, that seems to be a rather arbitrary, not to mention impossible to prove, requirement for what makes a concept or theory workable or ‘responsible’ when applied to literary criticism. After all, there are many modern advances in thought and practices—which an individual or character from another period would find incomprehensible—that it would seem counterproductive to disqualify when attempting readings of medieval literature.

Nevertheless, it is this type of approach (which it seems unlikely that any critics would ever fully adopt) that Patterson feels obliged to object to when he refers to ‘a parodic version of historicism... a naïve positivism that believes in the absolute “alterity” of the past.’⁴³ However, the fact remains that there has traditionally been a historicist viewpoint that sees psychoanalytical theory as detrimental to historical accuracy and resistant to historicist concerns. As Fradenburg asserts:

When a historicist in medieval studies attacks critiques of truthful historiography, she or he is more likely to pick on psychoanalysis... Is this because [as Julia Kristeva says] “only one

⁴² Scala, ‘Historicists’, p. 111.

⁴³ Patterson, ‘Pardoner’, pp. 644-5.

theoretical breakthrough seems consistently to *mobilize* resistances, rejections, and deafness: psychoanalysis”?

Psychoanalysis has served medieval studies as a whipping boy—or girl—for the convulsion in theories of knowledge that shocked every discipline in the twentieth century.⁴⁴

Furthermore, Fradenburg goes on to say, discussing the arguments of the French critic Jean-Charles Hûchet, that it is not only medieval historicists who look warily at the use of psychoanalytical approaches to literary criticism. In fact, she says, ‘Hûchet also suggests that we problematize the relations between psychoanalysis... and *all* literature, not just that written during the centuries that have come to be known as the Middle Ages.’⁴⁵ One of the main reasons for such a schism is suggested by Scala, when she speaks of ‘the vexed relations between psychoanalysis and history, in particular the concerns typically voiced by historicists discontent with what they see as a transhistorical, indeed even ahistorical, methodology.’⁴⁶ Thus, since historicist concerns are reflected in literary critical studies of different historical periods, it seems undeniable that there has been a certain wariness, if not outright antipathy, displayed by many scholars, whether in the field of medieval studies or from other periods, towards the utilisation or application of psychoanalytic theories in the field of literary criticism. Whether this uneasiness stems from a belief that psychoanalytic criticism artificially introduces universal concepts which have

⁴⁴ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, pp. 52-3. The quotation from Kristeva is from: *Kristeva Reader*, p. 303.

⁴⁵ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 65. Citing information from: Jean-Charles Hûchet, *Littérature médiévale et psychanalyse: Pour une clinique littéraire*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990), pp. 7, 9.

⁴⁶ Scala, ‘Historicists’, p. 108.

the effect of glossing over the empirical realities of historical life, or whether it arises from a concern that psychoanalytical concepts run the risk of injecting anachronistic elements into historical texts which deal with different cultures and value systems, the fact remains that there have been those literary critics who have considered psychoanalysis as an unsuitable methodology to help illumine literary readings.

Some examples of the wariness traditionally displayed towards the use of psychoanalytic formulations can be seen in certain cautious comments about their respective methodological approaches made in recent studies of medieval works by Elizabeth Scala and Sarah Kay. Despite utilising psychoanalytic terms in their respective projects, both Scala and Kay nevertheless feel the need to justify, or at least explain, their choice of psychoanalytical methodology.

Scala, in her introduction to her examination of what she sees as the prevalence of a phenomenon she calls ‘absent narratives’—or missing oral precursors to written texts that infuse the narratives of certain medieval writings, yet which are never actually referred to explicitly—begins to make her case for using psychoanalytic tenets in this study by establishing the fact that the works she will be examining are already outside of the strictly ‘historical’ framework within which historicists are most comfortable operating. Scala states that the modern versions of medieval books available to critics are already,

singularly *ahistorical* objects, modern texts for which we have no identical, medieval witnesses. Obviously, printed editions of these medieval works are absolutely necessary to the practice of our critical scholarship. But when we (re) create the author’s text

from the scribal copies that actually circulated in medieval culture (the individual manuscripts that comprise our historical evidence), we change what we mean by the word “historical”.⁴⁷

Scala’s point here appears to be that the particular conditions inherent in medieval textual production render the exact historical recreation of a medieval text virtually impossible. She offers this evidence in order to assert that, no matter how conscientiously one might try to adhere to historical veracity, a scholar is always inescapably going to have to consult or rely on texts which have been reassembled by those, such as editors or other critics, operating outside of the historical period in which the original texts were written. And, taking that into consideration means accepting, in Scala’s estimation, that the decision-making involved in the editors’ or scholars’ recreations of these texts will have altered them from their earliest, purely historical versions, unconsciously inserting anachronistic elements into the new editions.

Taking this point further, Scala argues that in the very act of examining texts, for the same reason that it is impossible to escape the unconscious application of one’s own individual thoughts borne of personal experience, a literary critic cannot help but insert ideas or approaches that could be seen as ahistorical or anachronistic. When this is the case, Scala believes that psychoanalytical tenets are actually an invaluable aid in identifying and gaining valuable awareness of any non-historically accurate aspects that may have

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Scala, *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure In Late Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 6.

been inserted into recreated editions or critical readings of medieval texts. She writes:

Psychoanalysis offers terms for explaining textual behavior; it helps us understand what the text contains, or even does, *beyond* what it says—its unconscious discourse. As a residual product of a lineage of texts and authorities, there is a latent relationship between the discourse of the medieval text and the ‘others’ (including other texts, writers, and readers) that inhabit it.⁴⁸

That Scala considers the use of psychoanalytic criticism to be a means of preserving historical accuracy, and thus helpful to the historicist agenda, despite historicist objections to the contrary, she makes clear when she declares:

Indeed only another can read the unconscious discourse of one’s critical work. For psychoanalysis this provides no new or revelatory statement. In Lacan’s famous dictum, “The unconscious is the discourse of the Other.” But for an historicism that claims self-sufficiency as a master hermeneutic, it may provide a radical challenge to its knowledge, most importantly, to its knowledge of itself: its debts, its figurations, and its desires... I will suggest that it is only psychoanalysis that can rescue historicism from the

⁴⁸ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, p. 6.

blindness it displays in relation to its own desires and its own historical moment.⁴⁹

Therefore, despite feeling the imperative to explain her use of psychoanalytic tenets in her particular project on absent narratives, Scala appears to believe that without the utilisation of psychoanalytical methods, all medieval literary criticism would be in danger of compromising the very historicist standards which psychoanalytic criticism is meant to threaten.

On the ability of psychoanalytic theory actually to enhance rather than detract from historicist techniques as regards literary criticism, Fradenburg emphatically concurs with Scala. She declares, 'One ironic result of the minoritizing of psychoanalytical medievalism on the grounds of its questionable historicism is that psychoanalytic medievalism has devoted considerable energy to problems of historical method.'⁵⁰ More specifically, touching on the specific means of helping to ensure historicist accuracy that psychoanalytic theory brings to the table, Fradenburg states:

Psychoanalytic medievalism is contributing to the development of historiographical approaches that are neither naively "transhistoricist" nor naively discontinuist, but are instead attentive to prospectivity and repetition, to the ways cultures wish to script their futures as part of their historicity, and to the unpredictable but nonetheless decisive ways in

⁴⁹ Scala, 'Historicists', p. 110.

⁵⁰ Fradenburg, 'Analytical Survey', p. 251.

which those scripts mark succeeding desires and subjectivities.⁵¹

Like Scala, Fradenburg attests here to the value of using psychoanalytic concepts to help improve the accuracy of historicist methodology through providing a means to identify hidden or unconscious leanings within literary critical readings which may unwittingly introduce the very anachronistic or ahistorical elements that historicists work so hard to eliminate from their projects. She points out that psychoanalytical approaches can actually provide a way to see not only what undoubtedly *was*, but also how that past really has resonance with what *is* today and also how the foundations for the bridge between *then* and *now* were being forged.

Indeed, Lacan, himself, as pointed out previously, was very clear on the need to maintain clear historicist perspective in the application of his theory. As Kay explains, 'Although Lacan is frequently accused of disregarding historical difference, he is in fact very emphatic that the various ways in which we unconsciously situate ourselves, and our conscious representations of our concerns, are all historically conditioned.'⁵² So conscientious was Lacan in this regard, that Bruce Holsinger unequivocally states: 'Lacanian psychoanalysis has from its inception been an archaeological, committedly historical enterprise.'⁵³ Thus, despite historicist concern over the potential of Lacanian psychoanalytic ideas to introduce anachronistic elements into literary critical studies, in actuality, when utilised carefully and correctly, these tenets can actually help better to ascertain and maintain historicist accuracy, rather than to taint it.

⁵¹ Fradenburg, 'Analytical Survey', p. 255.

⁵² Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, p. 26.

⁵³ Holsinger, *Premodern Condition*, p. 91.

It is now time to turn to the case of Kay's justification of her decision to use Lacanian psychoanalytical concepts in her historicist examination of contradiction in certain twelfth-century poems on courtly love. Specifically, she seems concerned that she might be accused of anachronistically projecting modern modes of thought onto medieval minds in the furtherance of constructing a totalising thesis in regards to certain modes of thought and behaviour. She states:

Some readers may protest that I myself am simply constructing my objects retrospectively in conformity with my own theories... According to this objection, psychoanalysis would inevitably find an application in medieval texts because it would reconstitute them according to its own expectations. If that were so, would I then also have redesigned the medieval thinkers I have read and the learned discussions by other scholars which I have drawn upon, in conformity with the same (or a different) model?⁵⁴

Here Kay is making the point that, if she, and the psychoanalytical tenets she employs to make the central arguments in her study, can be accused of artificially universalising human nature and ignoring the specificity of historical cultural and societal realities, then is she also to be charged with skewing the ideas and conclusions which she cites from other, non-psychoanalytical theorists—both from the medieval era, as well as modern times—in order to prove her thesis? Kay here attests to the extreme unlikelihood of her (or for that matter anyone else) being able to manipulate the interpretations of critics

⁵⁴ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, p. 304.

and commentators from several different ages, systems of thought and backgrounds to fit the answers of one particular model. If one accepts this contention as valid, Kay implies, then one would similarly be forced to accept that her utilisation of psychoanalytical concepts to help illumine a particular mode of thought or behaviour within her literary critical project would not automatically make her guilty of ignoring empirical reality in favour of untested and forced theorising.

These two examples serve to illustrate the fact that the implementation of psychoanalytic theory within the field of medieval literary criticism can leave scholars open to certain lines of attack from those wedded to a more historicist approach. Yet there also has been a fair amount of pushback from those critics who espouse the value of utilising a psychoanalytic methodology in their readings of medieval texts or those from other eras. These scholars have issued their own objections to what they see as the unrealistic standards and somewhat invented or exaggerated concerns demanded by a purely historicist approach. Fradenburg exemplifies this position and its primary charges against historicism when she writes:

What respect do we show the Middle Ages when we say that responsibility involves understanding the Middle Ages exclusively in its own terms, and then insist—in effect, if not explicitly—that only postmedieval alteritist views of time and methods of knowledge productions are capable of the attempt?⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 65.

In another vein Liz McAvoy, in a discussion of French theorist Michel de Certeau's ideas, points out that historicist rules can, just as easily as psychoanalytical concepts, be accused of having a certain artificial and totalising effect on the texts they are meant to help illumine. She states:

Although there are self-evident problems connected with ahistoricity, anachronicity and a tendency towards an essentialist view of the feminine, within the application of contemporary post-Freudian psychoanalytical theory to medieval texts, theorist Michel de Certeau has cogently illustrated the extent to which the lines of demarcation inscribed upon history by historiographers in order to structure time and memory can be seen as entirely arbitrary, and suggests that any psychoanalytical approach to the past helps to break down these arbitrary boundaries.⁵⁶

Therefore, from the viewpoint of those scholars who contend that it is useful to look at medieval texts (or works from other periods) through a psychoanalytical lens, the historicist insistence on somehow maintaining absolute, or as absolute as possible, historical accuracy by not allowing any modern theories somehow to taint the historicity of their readings is not only unreasonable but also, as a matter of practicality, impossible.

Furthermore, as critics such as Scala, as seen above, contend, managing to maintain historical purity is actually an unrealistic goal for most, if not all, literary critics due to the unconscious influences which infiltrate their studies.

⁵⁶ Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 13-4.

This contention is supported by the fact, which ironically psychoanalytic theory itself has helped to establish, that all authors, scholars included, cannot help but have their ideas and thus interpretations be filtered through the cultural and societal prism that forms what Lacan labelled the Symbolic order in each time period and that creates the language by which we learn to think and through which we communicate.⁵⁷ Fradenburg outlines the difficulty involved and the conundrum that arises for historicists who attempt to move beyond any influences which might naturally arise due to their membership in modern times and which might intrude upon their scholarly perspective or their presentation of their critical readings, when she states:

the historicisms of our time remain largely committed to the alterity of the past. We also know that historians are as bound by place and time as historical periods. How can we know an “other” past if we ourselves are bound by the terms of our present?... Medieval studies is charged with more than its share of the ethical burden of contemporary historicism: to put aside our modernity, especially the preferences it might imply, for the sake of truth.⁵⁸

Expressed in this light, it does appear to be somewhat of a difficult feat, and perhaps an unattainable one, for a critic, no matter how hard she or he might try, completely to rise above the built-in preconceptions, which result from simply being born and situated within a certain time period and/or culture. As Fradenburg further elucidates this issue:

⁵⁷ For more on Lacan’s conception of the Symbolic order, see: Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 201-3.

⁵⁸ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 45.

if we were to be... truthful about and to ourselves, we could not simply ignore the fact that we have grown up in a post-Freudian world in which self-care books based, however reluctantly, on Freudian concepts, make the best-seller lists... Historicist ethics nonetheless obliges us to analyze history by rising above any claims that our specific, local histories might make on us.⁵⁹

Here Fradenburg directly implicates the ubiquity of psychoanalytical influences in our modern era as a tough hurdle to surmount if one is dedicated to maintaining a strictly alteritist reading of literary products from the Middle Ages or, for that matter, any other historical period. Thus, the harm feared by some historicists that psychoanalytical tenets might inflict by somehow infecting and unnaturally impacting or transforming the verisimilitude of the past, would seem, according to Fradenburg, unavoidable whether a strictly psychoanalytical approach is employed to a critical study or not. Therefore, keeping that fact clearly in focus and taking it into consideration, it would seem wasteful and unnecessary, on that flawed basis, to disqualify psychoanalytical readings which could after all help further critical understanding.

When one takes into consideration some of the specific contributions to the understanding of knowledge production in modern times that have been made by psychoanalytical theory, such as Lacan's notions about the centrality of language to subject formation—particularly the ways in which subjectivity is created by one's relation to the Symbolic order through the chain of

⁵⁹ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 255.

signifiers⁶⁰—the difficulty of managing to escape from the built-in biases of one's own subjective position, even for a scholar, becomes easier to comprehend. Even a staunch historicist critic, such as Patterson, whose well-known attack against the use of psychoanalytic theory in literary criticism was cited earlier in this introduction, has had to admit, in reference to contemporary modes of thought or theories in general and the influence of psychoanalytical concepts in particular, that contemporary scholars' views are informed and to some extent formed by the intellectual and cultural environment which has produced them. He opines, 'Far from speaking language, we are spoken—and constituted—by it. And the sovereignty of consciousness so central to individualism has been almost wholly undone by the revival of Freudianism and its linguistic reinterpretation at the hands of Jacques Lacan.'⁶¹ Though the tone of this admission sounds almost rueful in regards to the assertions that he appears to be making, Patterson nevertheless seems to be clearly agreeing with Fradenburg on the near-impossibility of interpreting literary works wholly or largely from a historical perspective as if one is somehow operating in and from an ahistorical vacuum. Despite Patterson's seemingly more nuanced position in regards to the compatibility of historicism and theory, Fradenburg nevertheless insists that many historicists remain resistant to the notion that they might be, albeit on an unconscious level, expressing ideas that may be affected by unavoidable affiliation with the era in which they are situated.

⁶⁰ For more on this, see: Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 186-8.

⁶¹ Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (London; Routledge, 1991), p. 5.

That historicists try to overcome what seems to be almost an immovable impediment to complete historical purity—in the form of their membership in a modern milieu defined by, amongst other things, psychoanalytical concepts—strikes Fradenburg as both counterproductive and unnecessarily stringent. She states, ‘it is strange when historicists who believe that there is significant interchange between people and their time, but that this interchange is not transparent, break out in hives at the possibility that they might have had significant interchange with their particular histories that are not fully transparent or known to them.’⁶² Thus, despite the best efforts of even the most conscientious historicist, as this quotation acknowledges, a critic’s susceptibility to influences hidden from his or her view would make it virtually impossible to avoid colouring her or his literary critical readings with ideas or interpretations that reflect the culture or era in which s/he is located.

For this reason, Fradenburg offers the following caution: ‘we should try to avoid repeating the hidden homogeneity of historicist practice: namely that while positing the alterity of the past, we must alter our point-of-view in order to be as much like the past as possible.’⁶³ Instead, therefore, why not accept that complete historicist purity is impossible and, at the same time, take the help of recent theories of knowledge, such as psychoanalysis, to help illumine certain behaviours, notions or modes of thought revealed in texts, in a manner that highlights possible intersections or similarities with contemporary practices, whilst also maintaining awareness of differences caused by historical alterity?

⁶² Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 48.

⁶³ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 77.

By following such a prescription, a scholar such as Kay, when examining something as historically specific as contradiction inherent in courtly love poetry from the twelfth century, can not only identify and separate in her reading what actually stems solely from the period she is studying, but also discover and point out what postmodern models, such as, in this case Lacanian psychoanalytical theory, have to offer. Kay is able, by remaining aware of the historical and psychoanalytical influences and elements present in her interpretation and at work in her project, to situate what she refers to as a 'gap' between them, one which she finds helpful in answering the questions her study is posing and even in opening the door to further areas of exploration. She explains, 'Although from one perspective the irreducible differences between Lacanian analysis and medieval philosophical reflection create a gap in my argument, from another they sustain a sense of alterity and a potential for dialogue between past and present. It is this possibility of dialogue which opens up the potential for courtly literature to have been an agent of change.'⁶⁴ So, not only has her implementation of Lacanian psychoanalytical concepts, in tandem with her focus on historicist reality, enabled Kay to separate past and present in her critical look at medieval courtly love, but it has also, according to her, allowed her to be able retroactively to identify a facet of the area she is studying—contradiction in the texts of courtly love—as an influential mode of change, both in the past and also interestingly continuing into the present, where she sees some of the same elements occurring in contemporary times. This instance seems to point to the success of merging the tenets and practices of psychoanalysis and historicist medieval criticism, harnessing the most

⁶⁴ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, p. 304.

effective methodologies and approaches of both in the service of better understanding the medieval texts and the postmodern criticism of them. In aid of this type of cooperation and the possible positive results it can produce, Holsinger suggests that, 'theory might more enablingly be envisioned as a series of hermeneutic practices fully integrated and (to lift an appropriately sacramental term from medieval theology) consubstantial with the historicist practices of literacy and cultural study.'⁶⁵

Perhaps because of such collaborations—particularly the successful usages of psychoanalytical concepts by literary critics, including historicist medievalists, in their textual studies—there seems to be an ever-increasing rapprochement between these two modes of approaching medieval and indeed all forms of literary criticism. As Fradenburg herself, a staunch advocate of what she sees as the psychoanalytic side to the argument, has stated, 'Polemic... is only one way psychoanalysis and historicism have engaged each other in medieval studies, and itself bespeaks a certain mutual fascination.'⁶⁶ Such a mutual interest between models would explain why Scala, who appears to accept the use of psychoanalysis for historicist ends, would assert, 'yet if psychoanalysis needs to be historicized, as many of its detractors have claimed, so could historicism benefit from the exterior analysis of its desires and enjoyments offered by psychoanalysis.'⁶⁷ That a blurring of the lines between historicist and psychoanalytic approaches is indeed well underway can be further attested to by one of the most vocal proponents of the psychoanalytic mode over that of the historicist, Fradenburg.

⁶⁵ Holsinger, *Premodern Condition*, p. 11.

⁶⁶ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 12.

⁶⁷ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, p. 5.

Signalling a sense of optimism about what she clearly perceives as a growing collaboration between both approaches within medieval studies and literary criticism in general, Fradenburg first offers a list of 'historicist medievalists who have done important work with psychoanalytic concepts [which] include David Aers, Sarah Beckwith, Tony Spearing, Sarah Kay, Simon Gaunt, Sarah Stanbury, Larry Scanlon, Sheila Delany, Elizabeth Scala, Patricia Ingham, Jeffrey Cohen, and Michael Uebel.'⁶⁸ She then goes on to deliver the following assessment of the scholarly landscape and her forecast for the future, stating, 'The cross-pollination of historicism and psychoanalysis remains vital within as well as without medieval studies. The future is bright... much remains to be learned about historicism in general, and its medieval versions in particular, from the perspective of psychoanalysis.'⁶⁹ Indeed, Holsinger speaks of this relatively recent thawing of relations between psychoanalysis and medievalist historicist criticism as inevitable, and in fact overdue, when he states: 'the much-touted rapprochement between historicism and psychoanalysis of the late 1990s was more a belated reckoning than a hallmark of intellectual maturity.'⁷⁰ Therefore, despite the traditional existence of a theoretical divide between those critics who espouse a historicist approach and those who believe that introducing modern modes of thought, such as psychoanalytic theory, can only enhance both our understanding of the text and of knowledge in general, there seems to be an ever-growing awareness from both angles that perhaps these differing methodological approaches can be

⁶⁸ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 12.

⁶⁹ Fradenburg, *Sacrifice Your Love*, p. 11.

⁷⁰ Holsinger, *Premodern Condition*, p. 91.

harnessed to provide support to one another's critical points-of-view and works.

I would now like to take a brief look at some of the ways in which scholars have been using the concepts of psychoanalytic theory and particularly those of Lacan in their readings of medieval literature, in order to delineate and designate where my own approach fits in and contributes.

As already touched upon earlier in this introduction, Sarah Kay has based her reading on contradiction in twelfth-century courtly love poetry around certain formulations put forth by Lacan. Some of the ways in which she utilises Lacanian theoretical ideas include using his formulations of the Thing and subjectivity to look at the Occitan riddle and *romans antiques* and historical changes that they undergo;⁷¹ harnessing his conception of the ever-desired and never-attained *objet a* to show the appeal of contradiction, in the texts she is studying, to both medieval and modern audiences alike;⁷² implementing his theories on 'fantasy and desire, loss and trauma', to help understand 'much of the substance of medieval texts and also to help to define our relationship to them';⁷³ and finally utilising Lacan's notion of 'modern subjectivity as deriving from the erotic configurations of medieval courtly love poetry', perhaps as a means to enable the texts to help explain modern audiences to themselves.⁷⁴

In her more recent reading of the philosophical treatments of the concept of oneness in texts from the later thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries, Kay again turns to Lacanian psychoanalytical theory to help her shed

⁷¹ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, p. 144.

⁷² Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, p. 37.

⁷³ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, p. 36.

⁷⁴ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, p. 26.

greater light on her topic. She explains her methodological choice of Lacanian psychoanalytical theory as follows:

we are particularly well placed to engage with these concerns given that the “complexity of one”—singularity, community, and universality—has made a significant return to the philosophical forefront in recent decades... Lacan for example continue[s] a more strictly Aristotelian vein by reflecting on the antinomy that exists between the unknowable singular and the intelligible generality of language (or the Symbolic Order).⁷⁵

The Lacanian conception that Kay refers to here can be helpful, as I touched on earlier, in explaining and illuminating a medieval belief in God, in a manner more easily approachable to a sceptical or non-theological audience whose very language and chain of signifiers lacks the terminology to convey the concrete import of a singular, yet manifold, One, something Julian of Norwich herself refers to with her notion of ‘onyng.’

Scala, as mentioned earlier in this introduction, has used psychoanalytic theory in her reading of what she deems ‘absent narratives’ in certain medieval texts to examine not what is being said but what is left unsaid and thus what has invisibly and significantly contributed to the overall composition of the text itself. As she herself explains, “These psychoanalytic insights are not appropriate merely for their analytic purchase on critical and textual practice;

⁷⁵ Sarah Kay, *The Place of Thought: The Complexity of One in Late Medieval French Didactic Poetry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p. 14.

they extend to the structural operations of the medieval texts themselves.’⁷⁶

Specifically, in this vein, Scala refers to Stephen G. Nichols’ utilisation of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory in his study on medieval manuscripts and the interactivity between the visual aspects, such as rubrication and illustration, and the written narration in these texts. Scala states, ‘Nichols suggests that “the manuscript matrix consists of gaps and interstices, in the form of interventions in the text made up of interpolations of visual and verbal insertions which may be conceived, in Jacques Lacan’s terms, as ‘pulsations of the unconscious’ by which the ‘subject reveals and conceals itself.’”’⁷⁷ So, taking off from Nichols’ implementation of a Lacanian formulation in his philological reading of the particular makeup of medieval manuscripts, Scala adapts and develops this concept and its use into a full-scale line of thought. She then uses this initial point to construct her argument about the thought-based building of certain medieval texts around missing stories that represent the vestigial remains of a formerly oral tradition being replaced with a written one, which she attributes to an authorial attempt to burnish a work with some form of allusive *auctoritas*.

In regards to my exploration of Julian’s texts within this thesis, an approach of this sort—utilising certain Lacanian concepts to help examine what Julian says or does not say and how she says it at different junctures in her works—will be useful in determining what perspective Julian the narrator and Julian the seeker, assumes in her relation to different versions of her sought God.

⁷⁶ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, p. 13.

⁷⁷ Scala, *Absent Narratives*, p. 11. Stephen G. Nichols, ‘Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture’, *Speculum* Vol. 65, No. 1 (1990), pp. 1-10, (p.8).

Jane Gilbert has very recently invoked Lacan's discussion of the 'space between two deaths' in her reading of death in certain medieval French and English works. As she herself outlines her methodology, 'What I have attempted to do in this book is to use... Lacan's notion of *l'entre-deux-morts*—to think through some medieval examples of phenomena related to the [images of death fashionable in modern popular culture, such as vampires, ghosts and zombies, as the]... dead who return to place demands on the living; living who foresee, organize or desire their own deaths.'⁷⁸ In this way, Gilbert employs a modern interpretation of the motives and desires behind a self-willed martyrdom, Lacan's interpretation of the sacrifice of the titular character in the classic drama, *Antigone*, by Sophocles, to help illumine a similar topic in medieval texts, helping, one could argue, to create a dialogue between similar thoughts on this subject across millennia and cultures.

Simon Gaunt also employs Lacan's concept of the 'space between two deaths' in his investigation of mortality in French and Occitan courtly literature from the Middle Ages and specifically the tendency for heroes within certain texts to die for their love of a woman, to become secular martyrs.⁷⁹ These characters, Gaunt states, are driven by a desire that, in its compulsion to transgress all boundaries in search of fulfilment, tracks very neatly with Lacan's formulation on transgressive desire which claims that Antigone, for one (standing in for all those who refuse to sacrifice their desire for the Thing), will

⁷⁸ Jane Gilbert, *Living Death in Medieval French and English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 1.

⁷⁹ Simon Gaunt, *Love and Death in Medieval French and Occitan Courtly Literature: Martyrs to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

cross any limit, up to and including death, itself, in all its guises, in order to chase their longing.⁸⁰

In a similar vein, I will be employing certain aspects of Lacan's concept of the 'space between two deaths' to look at Julian's self-described encounters with death, as well as her embrace of mortality in her biological life as an anchorite, in order to suggest just how far she appears ready to go in order to pursue her own stated longing or desire for God.

The Foundation for a Lacanian Reading of Medieval Mystical Texts, Including those of Julian of Norwich

I would now like briefly to take a look at the usage to which psychoanalytic theory has been put in regards to literary critical readings of medieval mystical texts, as that is the area of greatest relevance to this thesis. As I touched on earlier, psychoanalytical and particularly Lacanian conceptions can be very helpful when trying to illumine the concept of a divine entity or God to readers who might be either sceptical about the existence of a supernatural deity or who might be unfamiliar with the intense ways in which some medieval mystical seekers, such as Julian of Norwich, chose to pursue and manifest their desire for the divine. Not surprisingly, therefore, over the last three decades there has been a proliferation of critical readings on religious or more specifically mystical texts that have taken as their approach psychoanalytic formulations, often those put forth by Lacan, to help shine light on various hermeneutical aspects or themes within these works that might otherwise

⁸⁰ For more on Lacan's formulation on desire, see: Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 35-9.

seem difficult to comprehend from certain modern intellectual perspectives.

Not only can Lacan's formulations on desire help to explain the mystic's intense emotional investment and relentless pursuit of the sought desired, but Lacanian psychoanalytical readings can also aid in effectively explicating the concept of the mystic's desired entity—God. Lacanian theory can translate the notions of divinity and faith in a manner that can be better understood by those who might view the unquestioned existence of an all-powerful deity as a rather dubious or even untenable concept.

As Fradenburg states, 'Psychoanalytic medievalism, including my own work, is turning more and more to the subject of religion in medieval culture.'⁸¹ Specifically, in her case, Fradenburg believes that 'psychoanalysis offers powerful means of analysing the fantastic consolations of religion.'⁸² In addition—due to the famous or perhaps notorious ability, as was discussed in detail above, of Lacan's formulations to be interpreted and utilised in a variety of (sometimes contradictory) ways, coupled with the correlation between Lacanian theory's central focus on the role of desire and certain medieval mystical devotional practices' seeming fixation on longing—there appear to be several fruitful directions in which medievalists have been utilising psychoanalytic or specifically Lacanian concepts in their readings of mystical texts. I will offer some examples below.

A certain strain of medieval feminist criticism, represented by scholars such as McAvoy, Sarah Beckwith and Amy Hollywood, represents one literary critical area which has found it fruitful to employ psychoanalytical, and often

⁸¹ Fradenburg, 'Analytical Survey', p. 266.

⁸² Fradenburg, 'Analytical Survey', p. 265.

Lacanian, concepts in its exploration of (predominantly female) mystical texts. Beckwith, for instance, in her examination of Margery Kempe's self-titled autobiography, implements the Lacanian notion of the Other, his designation for that which is distinctly unique from the chain of signifiers in the Symbolic order,⁸³ and thus outside of the normative frame of human reference, and also his conception of the female (due to a lack of a phallus, the ultimate desired signifier) as being synonymous with this Other, or at least its guise as emptiness or the Thing, in her attempt to depict feminine mysticism as a place where the idea of God and femininity intersect in a space of radical otherness. Beckwith explains her premise as follows:

Female mysticism in the late Middle Ages... is therefore an area in which the intermingling of God, the "Other" and woman is complexly overdetermined. Female mysticism is doubly colonised as a focus for the projection of Otherness because both God and woman are seen as the place of a mystified and un-representable (but nevertheless constantly represented) otherness.⁸⁴

In this way, through a Lacanian approach, Beckwith tries to shed further light upon the traditional misogynistic view of material feminine mysticism, which prevailed in the Middle Ages and has persisted even up until modern times—a view which had also led other feminist critics, such as famously Caroline

⁸³ For more on Lacan's concept of the Other, see: Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 132-3.

⁸⁴ Sarah Beckwith, 'A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe', in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 34-57, (p. 35).

Walker Bynum,⁸⁵ and from a more psychoanalytic standpoint, Simone de Beauvoir,⁸⁶ Julia Kristeva⁸⁷ and Luce Irigaray,⁸⁸ to offer their own theses on the same topic over the past half century.

Hollywood, in presenting her own feminist take on female medieval mysticism, actually takes a look at how psychoanalytic feminist criticism evolved this particular model of rehabilitating female medieval mystics, or at least appropriating them as symbols that could be used to help the cause of feminism in the twentieth century and beyond. She does so by looking at the works of feminists such as de Beauvoir and Irigaray (and even at the opinions on the topic offered by Lacan himself), which use psychoanalytic theory in order to read female medieval mystical texts in a manner that paints the female mystical body as a place in which, as Hollywood phrases it, 'the complexities of desire and identification play out.'⁸⁹ Irigaray, in particular, mobilised Lacanian theory against itself by rejecting Lacan's formulations of the Other as being represented by the masculine symbol of the phallus or its loss and located in a language controlled by a masculinised chain of signifiers. Instead Irigaray suggested that any notion of the divine to be truly expressed in literature,

⁸⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) and *Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

⁸⁶ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1989).

⁸⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) and Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

⁸⁸ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

⁸⁹ Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 217.

including that portrayed in medieval mystical texts, has, in a sense, to originate from a space outside of the patriarchy and patriarchal language.⁹⁰

In laying out the rationale and methodology for her study, Hollywood states:

This book asks why a handful of twentieth-century, resolutely secular, even anti-Christian intellectuals have been among the rare exceptions to the widespread denigration of affective and bodily forms of mysticism. Bataille, Lacan, and Irigaray (and at times Beauvoir) read those women not as pathological, emotionally excessive escapists, but as unique in their ability to bring together action and contemplation, emotion and reason, body and soul.⁹¹

In this literary critical endeavour, therefore, Hollywood is offering psychoanalytic ideas relating to female medieval mysticism directly from sources whose conceptions were in many cases foundational to the field of psychoanalytic theory and feminism to shed light not only on mystical texts and ideas, but also on the very psychoanalytic and feminist theorists who propounded these theories. Thus, not only is Hollywood's book a hermeneutical reading of medieval texts using psychoanalytic techniques, but also conversely an investigation of modern thought, including psychoanalytic and feminist theory, as reflected through the prism of certain contemporary thinkers' approach to the past and through the past itself, in the form of the medieval mystical texts which had such an impact on these modern intellectuals.

⁹⁰ Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 191.

⁹¹ Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 6.

Aside from the work of feminist medievalists in regards to medieval mystical texts, other critics have also been using a psychoanalytic approach to help illumine various elements within mystical or devotional works from the Middle Ages. Robert Mills, for example, has offered several readings on the topic of how pain has been portrayed, both in the visual arts and in texts, through the prism of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Mills seems interested in presenting and proving the thesis that, in the seeming enjoyment written on their faces and in their body positions and postures, figurations of suffering and tortured sacred figures—usually martyrs or the tormented Christ on the cross—represent a vision of pain that seems to point to ‘a highly unusual, some might say “alien”, attitude towards bodily sensation: a domain in which pain—habitually endowed with negative connotations—is, in particular discursive contexts, replete with “positive” meaning.’⁹² Harnessing psychoanalytic concepts, Mills attributes this depiction of pain as pleasure, in paintings, but also in hagiographical texts as well, to ‘elements that quite literally go “beyond the pain principle”, whether it be through the representation and eliciting of sadistic, voyeuristic gratification at the sight of a body in pain or through identification with that body as a means of gaining self-affirmation and fantasmatic pleasure.’⁹³ Mills goes on to specify that he wishes to examine this medieval orientation towards pain as pleasurable in terms of psychoanalytical and particularly Lacanian conceptions, such as desire,

⁹² Robert Mills, ‘A Man Is Being Beaten’, in *New Medieval Literatures*, vol. 5, ed. Rita Copeland, David Lawton and Wendy Scase (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 115-53, (p. 116). For a more extended look at Mills’ exploration of pain and martyrdom in medieval mystical visual representations and texts, see also: Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2005).

⁹³ Mills, ‘Being Beaten’, p. 116.

jouissance, the Thing, the gaze and identification. Furthermore, he declares his intent to employ these psychoanalytic ideas as a mode to understand:

(i) how hagiography and martyrdom iconography are fundamentally about self-affirmation and pleasure (spiritual, erotic, or otherwise), and (ii) how they nevertheless occasionally gesture towards something which—especially in the life of the medieval mystic—may be said to come close, at least symbolically speaking, to a temporary loss of self.⁹⁴

The notion of a ‘temporary loss of self’, in a medieval mystic, from a psychoanalytical viewpoint, is something that I will be touching upon myself, from a different angle, in presenting the arguments which will follow in the body of this thesis.

In addition to his investigation of the ways in which pain is presented in medieval mystical art and texts as reflected through a psychoanalytic and Lacanian prism, Mills also utilises the Lacanian concept of the gaze to examine the role that seeing and being seen, as a nun or holy woman, in the text *Sawles Warde*, can play in eliciting a hope of unity with the divine.⁹⁵

Since this thesis deals particularly with a reading of certain aspects within the texts of the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth-century female

⁹⁴ Mills, ‘Being Beaten’, p. 117.

⁹⁵ Robert Mills, ‘Seeing Face to Face: Troubled Looks in the Katherine Group’, in *Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality, and Sight in Medieval Text and Image*, ed. Emma Campbell and Robert Mills (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 117-36, (p. 125-8). In the medieval text *Sawles Warde*, which Mills is discussing in his study, holy women are both tempted and potentially tormented, or even damned, by receiving the flattering and perhaps corrupting gaze of a man, who is possibly demonic. The critical edition of this text is: N.R. Ker, ed., *Facsimile of MS. Bodley 34: St Katherine, St Juliana, Hali Meidhad, Sawles Warde* (London: Early English Text Society, 2006).

mystic, Julian of Norwich, *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love*, in light of specific psychoanalytic formulations of Jacques Lacan, I would now like to take a brief look at other works in the critical field which have approached Julian's texts, in particular, from a psychoanalytic and even a Lacanian vantage point. I would like briefly to put into context how this thesis fits in with other psychoanalytical readings of Julian's texts and with the overall field of Julian criticism.

Before offering examples of recent psychoanalytical approaches to Julian's works, I would first like to take a broad view of some of the prevailing currents in Julian criticism as a whole, in order to situate both where psychoanalytical readings in general and my own particular Lacanian approach fit within this field.

As far as some of the more recent and influential theological readings of Julian's texts, Denys Turner's *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* portrays Julian as an accomplished and sophisticated religious thinker in the scholastic and monastic modes, as opposed to an affective devotional seeker, a role more common for women during that time period.⁹⁶ Also from a theological perspective, and in a similar vein, Nicholas Watson, Christopher Abbott and Grace Jantzen have all written about elements in Julian's texts which, in their opinion, render their author worthy of the title of theologian.⁹⁷ Denise Baker has examined several

⁹⁶ Denys Turner, *Julian of Norwich, Theologian* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

⁹⁷ Nicholas Watson, 'Desire for the Past', in *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, ed. Larry Scanlon (New Jersey: New Chaucer Society, 1999), pp. 59-97; Watson, 'The Trinitarian Hermeneutic in Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium V*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 79-100; Christopher Abbott, *Julian of Norwich: Autobiography and Theology* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999);

aspects of Julian's texts from a theological point-of-view, such as the role that Julian assigns to the human soul, as compared to other continental mystics of the day, such as Meister Eckhart and Marguerite Porete and the ways in which her mode of mystical writing compares to that of her other so-called Middle-English mystical counterparts, Richard Rolle, Walter Hilton and the *Cloud* author.⁹⁸

Continuing with this brief, non-comprehensive survey of some of the recent and influential theological readings of Julian's texts, Annie Sutherland has looked at possible Biblical elements and influences within Julian's works⁹⁹ and Alexandra Barratt has examined the role that the Trinity plays within Julian's writings.¹⁰⁰ Much has been written about the marked evolution in sophisticated theological reasoning from one text to another and the virtually unique way in which Julian's Long Text shows evidence that, in parts, it is the result of Julian's continued contemplation of and commentary on both her original visions themselves, as well as the material in her Short Text. Baker, Barry Windeatt and, most recently, Michelle Karnes are some of the scholars

and Grace Jantzen, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1987).

⁹⁸ Denise N. Baker, 'The Structure of the Soul and the "Godly Wylle" in Julian of Norwich's *Showings*', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII: Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 2004*, ed. E.A. Jones (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 37-50; and Baker, 'Julian of Norwich and the Varieties of Middle English Mystical Discourse' in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 53-63.

⁹⁹ Annie Sutherland, "'Oure Feyth Is Groundyd in Goddes Worde" – Julian of Norwich and the Bible', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII: Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 2004*, ed. E.A. Jones (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 1-20 and Sutherland, 'Liturgy', pp. 88-98.

¹⁰⁰ Alexandra Barratt, 'Julian of Norwich and the Holy Spirit, "Our Good Lord"', *Mystics Quarterly* Vol. 28, No. 2 (2002), pp. 78-84 and Barratt, "'No such sitting": Julian tropes the Trinity', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 42-52.

who have weighed in on this topic.¹⁰¹ Focusing on one particular aspect in regards to this subject, Oliver Davies has advanced the theory that Julian's contemplation of and commentary on her own visions and previous writings bears great similarities to the monastic practice of *lectio divina*.¹⁰² Many more theological readings on Julian's works exist, too many, in fact, to cover within the limited and targeted scope of this introduction.¹⁰³

From a historicist literary critical perspective, there have been many studies that examine various hermeneutical elements in Julian's texts in the context of the late-medieval era in which she lived and produced her works. For instance, there is Aers' famous rebuttal of a feminist take on Julian's works. This essay interprets Julian's writings from the viewpoint of contemporary politics and status-seeking within the milieu of Christian writers of the late Middle Ages

¹⁰¹ Denise N. Baker, *Julian of Norwich's Showings: From Vision to Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Barry Windeatt, 'Julian's Second Thoughts: The Long Text Tradition', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 101-15, (p. 101; and Michelle Karnes, 'Julian of Norwich's Art of Interpretation', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2012), pp. 333-63.

¹⁰² Oliver Davies, 'Transformational Processes in the Work of Julian of Norwich and Mechtilde of Magdeburg', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England V: Papers read at Dartington Hall, July 1992*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 39-52. For other readings that look at Julian's tendency in her Long Text to offer commentary on her own visions and the accounts of them in her Short Text, see: Frances McCormack, 'Reading God: Visions and Revisions in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*', in *Transmission and Transformation in the Middle Ages: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Kathleen Cawsey and Jason Harris (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 98-114; Barbara Newman, 'Redeeming the Time: Langland, Julian, and the Art of Lifelong Revision', *The Yearbook of Langland Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2009), pp. 1-32.

¹⁰³ Some other theological approaches of note to Julian's texts, include: Jane Duran, 'Julian of Norwich Mysticism and Philosophy', *New Blackfriars*, Vol. 90 (2009), pp. 552-9 which compares Julian to other mystics and offers the opinion that Julian was a noteworthy teacher; Joan M. Nuth, *Wisdom's Daughter: The Theology of Julian of Norwich* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); and Abram Van Engen, 'Shifting Perspectives: Sin and Salvation in Julian's *A Revelation of Love*', *Literature and Theology: An International Journal of Religion, Theory and Culture*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2009), pp. 1-17.

and portrays Julian as a self-conscious author aware of the greater prestige associated with intellectual approaches to the divine and attempting, through the idiosyncratic way that she presents her visions, to paint herself as an exegete, rather than an affective worshipper.¹⁰⁴

Vincent Gillespie and Maggie Ross, from a literary critical, historicist angle, have examined certain features within Julian's works, such as her use of complex and sophisticated literary devices and styles, such as allegory and metaphor, as well as her tendency to amalgamate other contemporary spiritual writing styles into her texts in order best to convey her individual points and her overall message.¹⁰⁵ Also there have been several historicist readings regarding the incidence of certain language and phrasings within Julian's writings that they believe can be traced back to the literature on courtly love

¹⁰⁴ David Aers, 'The Humanity of Christ: Reflections on Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', in David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1996), pp. 77-104.

¹⁰⁵ Vincent Gillespie, '[S]he Do the Police in Different Voices': Pastiche, Ventriloquism and Parody in Julian of Norwich', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 192-207 and Gillespie and Maggie Ross, 'The Apophatic Image: The Poetics of Effacement in Julian of Norwich', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium V*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 53-77. For more readings on the sophistication of Julian's writing style, especially in relation to other contemporary authors, see: Ena Jenkins, 'Julian's *Revelation of Love*: A Web of Metaphor', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 181-91; Tarjei Park, 'Reflecting Christ: The Role of the Flesh in Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England V: Papers read at Dartington Hall, July 1992*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1992), pp. 17-37; Carmel Davis, *Mysticism and Space: Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle, the Cloud of Unknowing Author, and Julian of Norwich* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008); and Kevin Magill, *Julian of Norwich: Mystic or Visionary?* (London: Routledge, 2006). Also, for the possible influences of contemporary religious art on her works, see: Susan K. Hagen, 'The Visual Theology of Julian of Norwich', *Medieval Memory: Image and Text*, ed. Frank Willaert (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), pp. 145-60.

popular during that time.¹⁰⁶ Other historicist readings on Julian's texts have focused on various aspects within her texts which scholars have attributed to her possible enclosure as an anchoress.¹⁰⁷

There is also a strong current of feminist critical approaches to Julian's works. Some studies within this arena include Elizabeth Robertson's examination, following in the tradition of Bynum, of equating certain fleshly aspects within Julian's texts, such as her descriptions of the gaping, seeping wound in Christ's side, with the feminine and thus by association suggesting that female mysticism of this ilk somehow elevated women to the level of the divine.¹⁰⁸ McAvoy also examines Julian's works from the perspective of feminist criticism when, for instance, she explores what she posits to be Julian's conscious assumption of a holy woman authorial guise or persona in order to claim for herself one of the only types of authority available to late-medieval female spiritual writers.¹⁰⁹ Other scholars who have offered approaches to

¹⁰⁶ Readings in this vein include: Alexandra Barratt, 'Lordship Service and Worship in Julian of Norwich', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Exeter Symposium VII: Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 2004*, ed. E.A. Jones (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), pp. 177-88; and Jay Ruud, "'I wolde for thy loue dye': Julian, Romance Discourse, and the Masculine", in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire, (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 183-206.

¹⁰⁷ Critical studies on Julian related to this topic include: Denise N. Baker, 'Julian of Norwich and Anchoritic Literature', *Mystics Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (1993), pp. 148-60; E.A. Jones, 'Anchoritic Aspects of Julian of Norwich', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 75-87; and Laura Saetveit Miles, 'Space and Enclosure in Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Divine Love*', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 154-65.

¹⁰⁸ Elizabeth Robertson, 'Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*', in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 142-67. It was against this very reading that Aers was reacting so strongly in his historicist study of Julian listed above.

¹⁰⁹ McAvoy, *Authority*.

Julian's texts from a feminist literary critical standpoint include Maria R.

Lichtmann, Karma Lochrie, Lynn Staley and Sandra J. McEntire.¹¹⁰

Finally, a strong strain exists in the current field of Julian criticism which deals with the issue of post-medieval reception and the seemingly ever-growing popularity of this author and her works. As Julian's works have become more and more popular within certain spheres, many critics have taken up the challenge of attempting to explain what it is within Julian's texts and the sparse biographical data available about her that have struck such a chord and helped to create for her such an enduring (and malleable) legacy. Sarah Salih and Baker have recently edited a volume that deals exclusively with this topic. This edition covers a wide range of subjects touching on Julian's post-medieval reception, such as Julian's notion of sin playing a part in the poetry of T.S. Eliot,¹¹¹ Julian's emergence in popular fiction,¹¹² her role in the religious faith of a community of nuns in the seventeenth century,¹¹³ the part she plays in

¹¹⁰ Maria R. Lichtmann, "'God fulfilled my bodye": Body, Self, and God in Julian of Norwich', in *Gender and Text in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Jane Chance (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996), pp. 263-78; Karma Lochrie, *Margery Kempe and Translations of the Flesh* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1991), p. 83; Lynn Staley, *Margery Kempe's Dissenting Fictions* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994); and Sandra J. McEntire, 'The Likeness of God and the Restoration of Humanity in Julian of Norwich's *Showings*', in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire, (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 3-34. See also: Brad Peters, 'A Genre Approach to Julian of Norwich's Epistemology', in *Julian of Norwich: A Book of Essays*, ed. Sandra J. McEntire, (New York: Garland, 1998), pp. 115-52.

¹¹¹ Jewel Spears Brooker, 'The Fire and the Rose: Theodicy in Eliot and Julian of Norwich', in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy: Medieval Mysticism and Post-Medieval Reception*, eds Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 69-86.

¹¹² Susannah Mary Chewning, 'Julian of Norwich in Popular Fiction', in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy: Medieval Mysticism and Post-Medieval Reception*, ed. Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 101-12.

¹¹³ Jennifer Summit, 'From Anchorhold to Closet: Julian of Norwich in 1670 and the Immanence of the Past', in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy: Medieval Mysticism*

contemporary spirituality¹¹⁴ and her frequent and ahistorical appearances in the art and memorabilia¹¹⁵ that have proliferated to support a virtual cottage industry that has sprung up in Norwich around a figure who, in her lifetime, actively shunned any role in the spotlight.

Before moving on to look at some of the psychoanalytical critical readings of Julian's texts, I would like to state unequivocally that this thesis does not claim to offer a comprehensive Lacanian psychoanalytical reading of the texts of Julian of Norwich. Rather, as I have indicated earlier in this introduction, the goal of this project is to demonstrate the potential for reading certain parts of Julian's texts psychoanalytically, utilising particular aspects of Lacanian theory. I would also like to clarify that the reason I have chosen to adopt a primarily Lacanian approach in my own study of Julian's texts, as opposed to a theological, historicist, feminist or post-medieval one, is because I want to offer a view of certain of Julian's concepts, conclusions and self-declared experiences in light of a universal human behavioral or developmental psychological context, based specifically on Lacan's formulations on desire and the central role it plays in the human psyche. Elements of feminist, historicist and theological critical concerns do certainly play a part in my own Lacanian

and Post-Medieval Reception, ed. Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 29-47.

¹¹⁴ Christiana Whitehead, "'A Great Woman in Our Future': Julian of Norwich's Functions in Late Twentieth-Century Spirituality", in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy: Medieval Mysticism and Post-Medieval Reception*, ed. Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 131-51.

¹¹⁵ Sarah Salih, 'Julian in Norwich: Heritage and Iconography', in *Julian of Norwich's Legacy: Medieval Mysticism and Post-Medieval Reception*, eds Sarah Salih and Denise N. Baker (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 153-72. For more on Julian's post-medieval reception from Sarah Salih, see also: Sarah Salih, 'Julian's Afterlives', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 208-18.

examination of Julian's texts. However, the contribution that this thesis seeks to make to the wider field of Julian criticism involves explaining certain motivations, thoughts and revelations that Julian writes about from the perspective of human developmental and psychological tenets, particularly those dealing with desire, which Lacanian theory posits to be common to all individuals, across genders, time periods and faiths, but with adjustments for local, cultural and temporal circumstances.¹¹⁶

As far as some recent psychoanalytical readings of Julian's texts are concerned, Nancy Coiner interprets and tries to illumine a clearer understanding of what exactly the notion of homeliness in both Julian's texts—a description she often uses in reference to Christ in a context that would appear to denote his humility and his affinity towards and closeness to humankind, even from his exalted divine state—could mean to modern audiences. To accomplish this Coiner employs Freud's concept of the 'uncanny', his formulation of certain things which can seem very familiar and yet be very foreign, from his essay 'The Uncanny' or '*Das Unheimliche*'.¹¹⁷

McAvoy, in a recent examination of Julian's texts, uses psychoanalytic theory in order to suggest that these writings speak from a place and in a voice that not only can be interpreted as particularly feminine, but that have the power to redefine and even re-value what femininity means within the context of medieval mystical literature. She does this by, amongst other things, discussing Julian's description of 'God the Mother' in terms of a state that

¹¹⁶ For more on Lacan's particular form of a historically situated theory on the human psyche that involves a universal unconscious, see: Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 31.

¹¹⁷ Nancy Coiner, "'The Homely' and the *Heimliche*: The Hidden Doubled Self in Julian of Norwich's Showings', *Exemplaria*, Vol. 5 (1993), pp. 305-23.

prefigures the Lacanian Mirror Phase and thus the subject's entry into language. McAvoy equates that state, which Julian's maternal deity embodies or stands in for, with a type of *jouissance* that imbues the female (and thus supposedly affective and bodily) Julian with a power beyond the fleshly, a power indeed akin to God's. As McAvoy puts it, Julian's description of God as Mother (which I will return to in greater depth later in this thesis), 'points towards the unity of a mystical encounter with God in which the subject is endlessly generated, defined, relinquished and negated, in which all and nothing is possible, a unity which is pre-discursive and extra-linguistic.'¹¹⁸ Overall, in this psychoanalytically underpinned feminist reading of certain elements in Julian's texts, McAvoy puts forth the argument that Julian—a woman, who thus ought to have been, from a purely historical perspective, quite disempowered during the late Middle Ages, in which she wrote these texts—actually managed to recuperate a measure of power for herself through her depiction of God as Mother and its equation of the feminine with the awesome pain, pleasure and transgression that both beckons and threatens in Lacan's order of the Real.

In another vein, Mills has examined the manner in which Julian describes fixating on Christ's crucifixion throughout her texts, in light of Lacan's concepts of both identification with (in an approximation of the medieval devotional practice of *imitatio Christi*), and desire for the Thing, an elusive and ultimately, to Lacan, illusory pointer towards the *jouissance* that lies beyond language in the realm of the Real. Of her identification with the Thing, Mills

¹¹⁸ Liz Herbert McAvoy, "'For we be double of God's making': Writing, Gender and the Body in Julian of Norwich", in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 166-80, (p. 179).

states, 'Images like the crucifixion, on which Julian meditates, construct a kind of imaginary identification—akin to Lacan's "Mirror Stage"—in which the body in the image, elided with the imaginary signified, relinquishes its status as representation to *become* the body itself.'¹¹⁹ So, here Mills is suggesting that Julian's unrelenting focus on Christ as he languishes on the cross is enabling her imaginatively to place herself in his body. Julian is driven to do this, according to Mills, due to her desire for the Thing. Mills states, 'Julian's intense desire to transgress the pleasure principle in order to attain the inaccessible... Thing gives rise to her wish to experience the *jouissance* of suffering, to feel Christ's pain as her own.'¹²⁰ Thus, through identification, Julian manages to project herself into Christ's body, at least mentally and emotionally and, according to Mills sensually as well, in order to chase her desire for the unbearable painful pleasure of *jouissance*. These Lacanian concepts enable Mills to offer a reading of Julian's self-described behaviour, which otherwise could seem unfamiliar and hard to grasp from some modern perspectives, in a manner that leaves room for some type of contemporary connection and thus comprehension.

The Reasons Why and Ways in which this Thesis Utilises a Particular Lacanian Approach to Examine Specific Aspects of Julian's Texts

Having detailed the psychoanalytic approaches being utilised by medievalists in their readings of medieval mystical texts in general and the works of Julian of Norwich in particular, I would now like to explain why I have specifically chosen to implement a Lacanian psychoanalytic methodology in this thesis in

¹¹⁹ Mills, 'Being Beaten', p. 126.

¹²⁰ Mills, 'Being Beaten', p. 127.

order to shine a light on certain elements within these medieval mystical texts. I will then conclude this introduction by offering a brief summary of what each chapter in this thesis will address.

Basically, as with most of the examples I have tried to present up until this point of those critics who have opted to utilise a psychoanalytic model to help illumine the aspects of the medieval texts they have been exploring, it is my contention that the use of certain Lacanian modes of thought in order to look at notions or behaviours presented by Julian in her texts will open up the greater possibility of a shared ground of understanding that will hopefully enable modern readers better to comprehend Julian's possible motivations and thought. Whilst I agree that it is neither possible nor advisable to try and create or even suggest a complete equivalency between anything described by Julian, the product of a medieval culture and society, and the theories of Lacan, a thoroughly modern, post-Hegelian thinker, still I believe that establishing the existence of similarities between certain of Julian's notions and Lacan's concepts, such as her self-proclaimed longing for God and his concept of radical desire for the Thing, could allow for a clearer grasp of not only some aspects of Julian's texts, but also, in the end, particular areas of Lacanian theory.

The initial chapter of this study will focus on examining certain aspects of Julian's self-described spiritual journey—such as the relentlessness of her yearning for God, the fungible nature of this shifting and morphing divinity and the resultant mobility of imagery, cyclical employment of spiritual modes and originality that this produces in her texts—through the illuminating prism of Lacan's formulation on desire for the Thing. In particular, this chapter (and indeed this entire thesis) will address the extraordinary longing for God that

Julian refers to again and again throughout both her texts in the context of Lacan's formulations on desire, a theme that underlies most of his theoretical ideas. One of the things that I will propose is that the seeming insatiability of Julian's longing can be better understood when seen in light of Lacan's notion that, according to Mills, 'Desire has no content, and can never, in fact, be "realized"; it is rather, effected by the impossibility of the subject's ever uniting with the real being from which she is estranged by representation.'¹²¹ Through the prism of this Lacanian concept, the obsessive nature of Julian's self-described longing makes more sense, as it is always hungering and striving, yet can never be actually fulfilled, and in fact can never come even close to being satisfied.

The second chapter, building on the yearning nature of Julian's experiences and growing apprehensions of her beloved and longed-for Lord, will take a look at Julian's tendency to change the manner in which she discusses each of the versions of God, which her desire reveals to her, in terms of Lacan's concepts of anamorphosis, the gaze and subject as object. This approach will involve exploring Julian's incessant desire for the divine, as it plays out in her self-described dedication to follow her beloved wherever he, she or even it may lead, in terms of the Lacanian concepts above, which deal specifically with the morphing of the subject's viewpoint and even self-identification in order to pursue the various permutations, contortions and guises assumed by the seeming object or objects of desire. Through this avenue, it will be possible to examine the mutability of Julian's subject positions and approaches to her desired God, utilising Lacanian conceptions that deal with

¹²¹ Mills, 'Being Beaten', pp. 123-4.

the fluidity and formation of the subject when controlled by the signifier, as represented by the metonymic object or series of objects, which Lacan refers to as *objet a*.

Finally, in the third chapter of this study, I will examine the extraordinary lengths (and beyond) to which Julian declares herself willing to go in pursuit of her desire for God or the Thing, using Lacan's notion of the 'space between two deaths.' Throughout her texts, Julian frames the reception of her visions, the initial answer to her entreaty of longing for God, in terms of showings that are being received as part of a self-willed sickness which has resulted in a deathbed scene. Thus the answer to her fervent yearning for a closer approach to the divine, her sixteen visions, are portrayed in Julian's texts as the last sensate experiences or fantasmatic intimations of one *in extremis*. This apparent death wish of Julian's, or at the least her willingness to transgress all boundaries in search of her desire, will be looked at in light of Lacan's discussions on mortality and the seemingly destructive results that can occur when one is willing to pursue one's yearnings beyond all reasonable limits and into the order of the Real. As Mills has noted, 'Lacan has discussed the extent to which mystical desire breaches the inaccessibility of the Thing' and thus leads one past boundaries of sense and even safety.¹²² One example Lacan cites of this phenomenon involves the Italian medieval mystic Angela of Foligno who drank the water from a leper's feet in order to increase her desired identification with Jesus, through sharing in a measure of the suffering and abjection he underwent.¹²³ Julian's desire for God, whilst not as shocking in its

¹²² Mills, 'Being Beaten', p. 124.

¹²³ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 88.

manifestation as Angela of Foligno's, is nevertheless arguably every bit as obsessive and unrelenting, as attested to time and again in her texts. Her longing appears to be so vast and intense that there seem to be literally no limit that she will not burst through in its pursuit. Even the ultimate sacrifice of her own mortality proves to be one she is prepared and even eager to make.

Lacan's psychoanalytic formulations on desire in particular, therefore, are ideally suited to this thesis's attempt to unpack some of the ideas and choices laid out in Julian's late-medieval mystical texts. Whilst her vision of what and whom she was longing for might seem very clear to Julian, a Christian anchoress who was, after all, very much a product of the late-fourteenth century, the intensity of her desire, its mutability and the extreme lengths to which she is committed to following it are all aspects which could have seemed as out of place in her era as they might to some now. Yet, seen through the light of a Lacanian methodology, this desire and the behaviour it wreaks, begins to make more sense. Or at least it starts to come into sharper focus, when seen through the prism of Lacanian ideas. This is because these psychoanalytic conceptions allow for the possibility of tracing similar motives, actions and thoughts across time—which coupled with responsibly making allowances for historical variations in culture and society—can enable one to arrive at, if not a complete connection with Julian's ideas, at least a greater understanding.

Furthermore, and in the final analysis, having hopefully asked and answered the question of what Lacan's formulations can do for Julian, I will suggest, in the conclusion to this thesis, that there is room for mutual implication between certain aspects of Julian's texts and particular elements of Lacanian theory. Specifically, in taking a look at the love (or desire) which

Julian declares constitutes the singular and sole meaning of her texts, I will suggest that Julian's search for and possible apprehensions of this limitless love (or desire) share something fundamental in common with Lacan's concept of desire for desire, and thus might help better to explain a certain vital aspect of the thought and theories of Lacan.

Chapter One: Looking at Julian's Desire in Terms of Lacan's Thing

Although Julian of Norwich wrote *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman* and *A Revelation of Love*, her two very similar accounts of the sixteen divine visions she claimed to have received in May 1373, approximately six hundred years ago,¹ it is my contention, as I stated in the introduction, that it would be beneficial to filter these texts through the lens of a Lacanian reading.

I intend to argue in this chapter that Julian's texts, in their tone, use of imagery, the conclusions that they draw, the language they employ and the evolutionary narrative perspective they evince, present the chronicle of a spiritual journey embarked upon and pursued because of an excess of intense and unwavering desire. I also posit that the desire in question, which so ceaselessly drives Julian of Norwich's search, can be understood with reference to the Lacanian concept of desire, which manifests as a transgressive motivating force that appears to be directed at a single object which shifts in shape or parameters the closer one approaches it or at a series of objects that

¹ Although some agreement exists that Julian wrote *Vision* at a date very near to her initial experiences in 1373 and then, according to evidence presented in *Revelation*, composed this revised version approximately 20 years later, Watson in his 'The Composition of Julian of Norwich's *Revelation of Love*', *Speculum* Vol. 68 (1993), pp. 637-83, offers an alternative set of dates. He places the composition of *Vision* in the 1380s and dates *Revelation* to the fifteenth century. Watson bases this on his contention that *Revelation* betrays evidence of a more cautious theological approach in deference to the climate of censorship imposed by Arundel's *Constitutions*, which went into effect in 1409. For more on this issue, McAvoy offers a summary of critical thought in "'God forbade... that I am a techere'": Who, or What, was Julian?' in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 1-16, (pp. 4-5).

act as substitutes or stand-ins for one another. In the final analysis this Lacanian desire never finds satisfaction in any object, but always leads to the next receptacle, until, in the end, it points back to the subject itself, the source of desire. Lacan refers to the constant substitution of objects, which marks the displacement of desire from one focus to the other as a metonymy of desire.² In Lacan's formulation of this sort of desire the purported object or objects upon which the subject's desire rests or seems to focus is referred to as the *objet petit a*, the 'a' stands for *autre*, the French word for 'other' and Lacan designates it as *petit* or 'little' in order to distinguish it from the big 'A' or 'Other', which refers to the collective set of external opinions and desires (beginning in childhood with that of the father) which define and shape a subject externally.³ Since, even when attained, none of these objects or partial objects ever provide ultimate satisfaction or fulfilment, according to Lacan, what is really being sought in such cases is a quantity that he calls the Thing, his reworking of Freud's concept of *Das Ding*.⁴ This mysterious and utterly indefinable Thing represents the essence of desire itself. It is that which is being sought within every object and yet that which can never be found because it has no existence within the realm of signification, created and defined by language, in which all subjects are forced to live.

To understand Lacan's notion of the Thing and the role it plays within his model of desire, one first has to form an understanding of what desire

² Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 293.

³ For a thorough definition and explanation of this concept, see: Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 124-6.

⁴ Lacan, *Ethics*, pp. 53-4. See also: Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 204-5. As referenced earlier, Freud introduces the concept of *Das Ding* in his 'Project for a New Scientific Psychology'.

means to him. Basically (being mindful of the danger of trying to render any Lacanian concepts one-dimensionally or even simply), Lacan's framework of desire, as presented in *Seminar VII*, revolves around what he identifies as a lack or gap at the centre of the human experience of self-identification. This self-defining lack arises in human beings, according to Lacan, at a very early developmental point and occurs when, looking into a mirror as a toddler held in its mother's arms, a child realises that the specular image gazing back at it from across the room actually *is* it and yet also is somehow simultaneously separate from the enclosed, physical body that is perceiving the image.⁵ Elizabeth Grosz says of this time of psychic catharsis, which Lacan christened the Mirror Stage, that it represents the 'first acknowledgement of lack or loss. Only at this moment,' she continues, 'does [the child] become capable of distinguishing itself from the "outside" world and thus of locating itself *in* the world. Only when the child recognizes or understands the concept of absence does it see that it is not "one", complete in itself, merged with the world as a whole and the (m)other.'⁶ It is precisely at this point in the Lacanian model that language enters the picture and begins to define human beings with the words and concepts of the others or the collective other that now appear(s) all around one.

Language, to Lacan, forms the basic and inescapable building blocks of the life that all subjects lead. It is the Mirror Stage⁷ in which one becomes, in Lacan's lexicon, a signifier in a chain of signifiers, a defined being trapped within the Symbolic order, the web of understandings and judgements and

⁵ For more on this pivotal Lacanian concept, see: Jacques Lacan, *Écrits : The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2005), pp. 75-81.

⁶ Grosz, *Jacques Lacan*, pp. 34-5.

⁷ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 12.

identifications that pre-exist all subjects and that give them the definitions and imagery they need to create a fragmented self-image within the register of the Imaginary, the space in which their illusory and projected ideas of themselves, borne from the impressions and designations foisted upon them by those who surround them, play out the illusions that define and confine their existence. Freud's 'pleasure principle,'⁸ Lacan opines, is nothing other than that urge for comfort and avoidance of pain that keeps most humans engaged in thoughts and actions that avoid all attempt to recapture the lost wholeness,⁹ which can only be accessed very fleetingly in moments of intense ecstasy, which he terms *jouissance*. This experience of *jouissance* is obtained when one follows one's desire in search of the Thing beyond the limits of language, past the bounds of the Symbolic and Imaginary orders and into the territory of an order Lacan calls the Real. The realm of the Real refers to that part of the psyche not controlled by language or the desires of the Other, a place to which all unchecked desire eventually and inevitably leads.¹⁰ Hollywood remarks on the Lacanian phenomenon of entering this state or register that lies outside of language and representation and how it relates to medieval mysticism when she writes, 'For Lacan, mysticism and feminine *jouissance* provide access to the real; they are shattering and ecstatic encounters with "that which is."'¹¹

⁸ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works*, Volume 18, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. 7-66.

⁹ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 134.

¹⁰ For more on Lacan's definitions of these three orders of the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real, see: Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 201-3 (on the Symbolic register); pp. 82-4 (on the Imaginary order); and pp. 159-61 (on the order of the Real).

¹¹ Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 194.

Hollywood's comment reflects the fact that both medieval mysticism and the Lacanian desire for the Thing seem to share a similar, if not identical, push to follow one's desire for the sought and elusive object—be it ecstatic union with God or some other object, virtually impossible to quantify, that results in *jouissance*—no matter where the search may lead, past all limits and into the void beyond language itself.

For those relative few who choose or are compelled to risk the oftentimes painful disruption (Lacanian *jouissance* often takes the form of an overabundance of pleasure so strong as to be almost unbearable) that can result from rupturing one's Imaginary self-image in search of a return to that lost sense of plenitude, Lacan states that the motivating force behind this transgressive compulsion is always desire. And because this desire is never predicated upon the gain of a particular concrete object, but is actually directed towards the filling of a gap or a hole, Lacan argues that what is actually desired is the gap itself or the emptiness which resides within *objet petit a* or a series of partial objects, a void we long to fill, yet which represents the only intimation of wholeness we have ever known. Lacan's name for this emptiness, this essential desired essence that is contained within all desired objects, but that never can be attained, is the Thing. He explains, 'it is this object, *das Ding*, as the absolute Other of the subject, that one is supposed to find again. It is to be found at the most as something missed.'¹² Therefore, to sum up, this elusive quantity—which is at the heart of desire, to Lacan, and can never be attained, since, in his formulation, nothing or no-thing can ever be represented or captured in any meaningful way when it exists (or purports to exist) beyond the boundaries of

¹² Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 52.

language, signifiers and the Symbolic order—is the Thing contained within all desired objects. It is this Thing that provides the impetus which powers the drive for transgression or transcendence that motivates, at least according to the evidence in their writings, certain individuals, such as the medieval mystics, who will never be satisfied with a life of comfortable answers, but will follow time and again the desire that most everyone else will repress all the way to temporary entry into the register of the Real and *jouissance*.

Examples of How Lacanian Desire for the Thing Manifests in Julian's Texts

Having sketched a basic picture of the dimension of Lacanian theory in regards to desire for the Thing upon which I would like to concentrate, I would now like to state why I think these concepts provide a relevant and useful prism through which to consider certain aspects of Julian of Norwich's texts. Essentially my narrowly focused Lacanian reading of certain aspects of Julian's accounts rests on my contention that, throughout the descriptions of her visions and the conceptual theological evolutions of her books, Julian explicitly claims to be consistently motivated by a burning desire for an aspect of the divine, be it Jesus or God the Father. The fact that the exact appearance and/or the meaning of the sought entity keeps shifting throughout the texts—often, as I will soon demonstrate, in a non-linear, if not unsystematic fashion—lends credence to a Lacanian interpretation of Julian's desire as actually being directed towards the Thing, a quantity that is within, but not of any particular object or objects. Lacan points at this sort of reading of the Thing as the true sought entity behind the quests of certain medieval mystics, when, as part of his discussion about desire for the Thing, he states, 'Master Eckhart uses *Ding* to refer to the soul,

and heaven knows that for Master Eckhart the soul was a *Grossding*, the biggest of things.¹³ Mills adds his support to this type of interpretation when he opines that, 'In the context of late-medieval devotion, the Thing is therefore the object of desire. It is that which the mystic wants, a lost object which must be continually refound.'¹⁴ Labbie explicitly acknowledges the potential that the desired Thing has to be interpreted as transcendent and even divine, when she states: 'The place of God in this world is purely supplemented by the unconscious. As that which seeks to have an impossible relation with an unknowable other, the subject displaces desire onto the idea of God, created precisely to fill his position so that desire has a localized aim.'¹⁵ Thus, the Lacanian term—the Thing—can help to clarify what was often being described in late-medieval mystical writings as God or Jesus, the stated desired goal or aim of the majority of these texts.

When it comes to Julian of Norwich and her description of her desire for the divine which certainly seems to form the heart and foundation of her accounts of revelatory experience, the longing portrayed betrays the intensity, the singularity of focus, as well as the restlessness that characterise Lacanian desire for the Thing. From the very outset, desire plays a crucial role in Julian's retelling of her visionary experiences. It is to desire, after all, that Julian attributes the very gestation of the sixteen showings that form the basis of her visionary accounts and her complex theological concepts. In the throes of a life-threatening disease, Julian informs the reader, she reaps the rewards of a youthful set of desires, one of which was for a 'bodily sicknes... hard as to death'

¹³ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 114.

¹⁴ Mills, 'Being Beaten', p. 125.

¹⁵ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 222.

(*Revelation*, 2.19), and which also included both a wish to experience Jesus' Passion in a bodily, as opposed to imaginative, fashion (*Revelation*, 2.5-16) and to gain an increase of longing for God or, as she phrases it, 'wilful longing to God' (*Revelation*, 2.35-6). This concept of an active and intentional or effortful longing for God is something that Julian will return to many times throughout her texts, seemingly signifying her contention that there can never be a surfeit of longing for God. Indeed this type of active yearning for yet more and ever deeper longing appears to represent for Julian the best, if not the sole, means that those who love God can rely upon to keep them pointed towards the divine and away from temptation or the pitfalls of evil's interventions. It is through longing, after all, that Julian draws her beloved God to her, in the form of her visions. Thus, to long for longing could actually be equated with taking the only positive steps open to her (or to her fellow Christians) in order to approach nearer to her coveted Lord. Indeed, in this example, she illustrates that not content with a level of longing that had already led her to pray for a grave illness intended to afford her a degree of imaginative affinity with Christ, Julian had felt compelled to ask for even more and greater longing. Furthermore, according to Julian, unlike the other requests she had made to God which had faded from her awareness, this prayer for greater and greater desire, 'dwellid continually' (*Revelation*, 2.38) in her mind. In its intensity and in the focus and importance that she places upon the role of her own intentionality in maintaining and following it, Julian's prayer for an active longing closely approximates to the Lacanian concept of desire for desire, which will be discussed in great detail in the conclusion to this thesis.

From this initial beginning born of desire comes a set of visions which only fan the flames of her longing. Desire stretches out through the course of the texts marking an unrelenting theme and motivation underlying every aspect of Julian's account, a fact summed up in the following words of Julian herself, who proclaims, in a sentiment she echoes many times throughout the course of her works, 'we may never bli of willing ne of loving tille we have him in fulhede of joy. And than we may no more wille' (*Revelation*, 6.50-1). These uncompromising words assert Julian's intention, if not her compulsion, never to cease wanting and loving her desired beloved until she has attained the object of her longing, fully and completely. Only at that point, she concludes, will her desire, her longing, finally end, at last achieving satiation. This declaration clearly marks her insistence that, whatever else her revelations may offer in the way of insight, understanding or shared experience with the divine, the unmistakable origination point and intended destination of all that she has received from her revelations and all that remains to be revealed stems from her active and ceaseless longing for God and results in the experience of an unconditional, all-encompassing, omniscient and reciprocally desiring love that has the ability to slake the ceaseless longing by uniting the human with the divine.

All of Julian's desire and love, moreover, is for an object, God, that bears more than a passing resemblance to Lacan's Thing. Julian's desired object constantly appears to shift and change in its appearance and/or meaning. At times it even seems that an entirely new object can suddenly and without explanation take the place of the former object altogether, as when Jesus is seamlessly replaced by or incorporated into the Trinity (*Revelation*, 4.11-12);

or when Mary is introduced as the vessel of the soon-to-be embodied manifestation of God, who will be born as Jesus, who will then, in turn, become, in his own right, the vessel or mother of humanity's (including Mary's) salvation (*Revelation*, 4.29-31); or when Adam (who never formed any part of a desired object) suddenly morphs into Christ (*Revelation*, 5.1.179-91). Thus, Julian's desired beloved behaves almost exactly like the Thing with supposedly concrete and definable objects shifting into new shapes or receding and morphing, without warning, into the murkiness and growing emptiness of a formless form very familiar to apophatic theologians' and very close to Lacan's notion of the void beyond language in which *jouissance* beckons.

Throughout the course of this chapter I will take a close look at certain aspects of Julian's texts that I believe reveal that she is writing about not only her own experiences of and revelations about her encounters with various versions of her beloved God, but she is also describing something that resembles closely a desire for the Thing. I will concentrate upon elements, such as her constantly shifting imagery; her employment of three prevailing modes of medieval mystical seeking— affective, intellectual and unitive—in a non-linear manner; and her original treatment of certain tropes and techniques of medieval devotional writing, such as Jesus/God as Mother, cataphatic versus apophatic language and the narrative voice or perspective, in order to point out how they can be uniquely explained, interpreted and illuminated through a Lacanian reading.

Mobility of Images

The first element that I would like to address in Julian of Norwich's texts which, I believe manifests a particularly Lacanian desire for the Thing, involves her frequent employment of imagery that appears to be in constant motion. Julian opts not to illustrate the accounts of her visions, as well as the subsequent reflections they spawned, with pictures frozen in time, static representations that could be interpreted solely as icons or tropes. Instead she chooses to present her story with a series of images that while they may appear to originate from wholly familiar and conventional sources (except for the hazelnut-like object)—such as some of the era's more popular Passion iconography or biblical parables—soon take on a significance of their very own, due to their active refusal to remain still.¹⁶ Gillespie remarks on just this phenomenon in Julian's texts when he states, 'Warily resistant to the reductive, the schematic and the programmatic, her text is full of surprises, textual aporias that suddenly (such an important word in Julian's textual universe) open up beneath our feet. Just as we make ends meet, Julian moves the ends.'¹⁷ She, in essence, keeps her images alive and thus open to a wider range of interpretation by animating them.

Before I offer examples of the shifting and mobile imagery in question and discuss them in depth, I would first like to address the matter of why

¹⁶ When I refer to the ability of Julian's writings to transmute, contort or even subtly defy the conventions of contemporary devotional literature, I do not intend to suggest, or in any way imply, that Julian was the only writer of her day engaged in original and even subversive interpretations of traditional affective tropes. I also am aware that, whilst there may have been some fairly standard representations and interpretations of certain devotional themes, such as the Passion, for instance, there was no one undeviating set of images or perceptions from which affective writers drew and to which they referred.

¹⁷ Gillespie, 'Pastiche,' p. 198.

exactly these moving pictures are a symptom of Julian's desire. At the crux of Lacan's formulation of desire for the Thing lurks the notion that the object which the subject believes s/he is desiring (as represented in art or literature by the image) is, in fact, a cipher, an empty shell devoid of any inherent significance of its own. Lacan articulates his reasoning for this formulation when he states:

works of art imitate the objects they represent, but their end certainly is not to represent them. In offering the imitation of an object, they make something different out of that object...

The object is established in a certain relationship to the Thing and is intended to encircle and to render both present and absent.¹⁸

Thus, according to Lacan, just as an object *a* can never satisfy one's longing for the Thing, that which one—whether artist, writer or visionary—offers as a visual example of a sought object, of the desired quantity, can never actually capture the essence of what makes it desirable, the Thing which appears to reside within it fleetingly, but which recedes or morphs or jumps into another object or image entirely the moment one draws near. An example of this occurs in Julian's accounts, when, after watching the embodiment of God, 'oure lorde Jhesu languring long time' (*Revelation*, 20.1) on the cross and enduring 'more paine than alle men might suffer' (*Revelation*, 20.3), Julian abruptly begins discussing her beloved Lord in terms of a much less clearly incarnate form, segueing from Christ's pains directly into the statement, 'And in this, he brought to mind in parte the hight and the nobilite of the glorious godhede, and

¹⁸ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 141.

therwith the precioushede and the tendernessee of the blisseful body, which be together oned' (*Revelation*, 20.12-14). So, from a seemingly straightforward and familiar portrayal of her desired quantity as the affectively wrought Christ suffering mightily on the cross, Julian switches, suddenly and without warning or explanation, to a depiction of a much less clear-cut form of her sought God, one that appears to present qualities of the transcendent godhead mingled, in some unspecified way, with the still crucified body of Jesus.

Lacan, as previously mentioned, sees this Thing within sought objects as, in actuality, emptiness, as no-thing, a stand-in for the gap (and that which can fill it) that resides in the centre of each subject. This Thing, therefore, is only able to be experienced as a brief flash of blinding *jouissance*, yet can never be truly apprehended. However, the power at the heart of desire which is fuelled by the ecstatic encounters with the Real pushes those in its throes, including medieval mystics such as Julian, to chase the Thing, through whatever shifts it may effect in an object or through an ever-altering sequence of objects—which Grosz, elucidating Lacan's model, refers to as, 'a (metonymic) chain of objects, substitutable for each other... as signifiers of the other's desire'¹⁹ relentlessly and endlessly.

Thus we return to the mobility in Julian's imagery and the role this plays in her pursuit of a Lacanian desire for the Thing. Specifically, I contend that Julian often employs a transitional imagery, one which displays a tendency to move, shift or transform in manners or directions that might not quite have been expected or anticipated, based on traditional representations or even on her own prior narrative track. Again, the reason that I believe this evidences a

¹⁹ Grosz, *Lacan*, p. 62.

specifically Lacanian version of desire is because it illustrates Julian's refusal to settle for a description of any object or partial object in her attempt to understand or convey the divinity or the Thing she loves. Therefore, in her imagery, Julian looks past the accepted answers about the nature of God that had come to be installed, at times in a sort of visual shorthand, within the popular representations often called upon and utilised by some of the more traditional devotional writers and seekers of her day, such as Nicholas Love.²⁰

Rather than, therefore, risking the chance of providing an image that may imprison the idea or essence of divinity, or the desired Thing, within a static object or immobile idea, Julian opts to explode the boundaries of all representations of and concepts about her beloved. One of the best ways to do this would have been to change the parameters of the set visual type by setting it in motion. Julian's utilisation of mobile imagery in order to convey her unrelenting pursuit and apprehension of the core of divinity *within* objects, the Thing in Lacanian parlance, rather than the objects or images themselves, can best be evidenced in several examples from her texts. These include her treatment of the recurring sequence of Passion images whose aggressive liquidity signals Julian's unwillingness to allow Christ's crucified form to

²⁰ Michael G. Sargent, ed., *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ/ Nicholas Love* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005). For more on the almost rote responses that devotional art and literature could have expected to have elicited in the late-medieval period, see: Gillespie and Ross, 'Apophatic Image', pp. 61-2. Again, as I stated previously in this chapter, in note number 16, I am not implying that Julian was the only writer of her day engaged in this type of original and creative subversion of conventional pietistic tropes and concepts. She was one of several writers, such as William Langland, Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe turning traditional affective conventions on their head. Also, again, I will reiterate that, whilst there may have been easily recognised and accepted traditional depictions and interpretations of affective subjects, still there was no one standard set of stock affective images of tropes.

crystallise into a static and thus defined object; the single image of Jesus' face which at the very last second changes expression freeing him from the accustomed end to which the Passion usually dooms him, death on the cross; and the metonymic series of figures within the Lord and Servant vision, which sees the servant assume the form of Adam, Jesus and, it seems, when all is said and done, every single member of Christian humankind.

Passion imagery forms a crucial part of Julian's texts, particularly the early sections of the works which focus in an intermittently recurring fashion on her accounts of various showings or perhaps one frequently interrupted vision of Christ undergoing the torments of his well-reported crucifixion. Of the structure in which these images are presented, Sutherland comments, 'Julian's writings are characterized by the manner in which they allow Christ's Passion to fade in and out of narrative focus.'²¹ Indeed, Julian weaves these Passion scenes throughout almost the first third of her texts. These early sections of her accounts portray Jesus' sufferings as he moves inexorably towards a seemingly certain death nailed to the cross, interspersed with excursions into discussions of the deeper meaning behind what she is seeing, what she is being told and about the nature of God and the universe itself.

Whilst Julian initially appears to offer figurations of Christ's Passion that fit comfortably within the accepted visual and literary panoply of the tradition, the images soon begin to behave in manners that defy simple categorisation. As Aers puts it, Julian displays the 'ability to invoke and then transform, or sideline, dominant representations of Christ's humanity.'²² One of the ways in

²¹ Sutherland, 'Liturgy', p. 96.

²² Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 87.

which Julian accomplishes this feat is through her deployment of a recurring motif within her Passion depictions which enables her consistently to animate Christ's image and also aids her in her transitions into and out of Passion scenes. The motif to which I am referring is her use of the blood of Christ,²³ a substance which, in Julian's texts, is incessantly in motion. Its aggressive fluidity forbids Jesus' form from ever congealing into a static, represented object, always keeping his image, his borders as a symbol or an object, open and ready to be possessed by the Thing.

Right from the very onset of her visions, in fact, in the very instant that the crucifix she is fixated upon (in what she believes to be her last hour) becomes animated and signals the start of her showings, it is the blood of Christ that sets everything in motion and leads one into her largely visual apprehensions of the Passion. Conveying a type of movement ideally suited for the liquid, Julian announces the arrival of her first showing with the abrupt seeping of Christ's wound bringing to life a formerly inanimate object, declaring

²³ The motif of Christ's blood also appears in instances other than those strictly related to his Passion. For example, in the first instance in which Julian refers (though indirectly), to Jesus as Mother—her description of being led by Christ into the wound in his side—she also uses pouring blood as a transitional motif (*Revelation*, 24.5-6). For more on this, see: Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006) and Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*. In addition, later on in this chapter, in a discussion on Julian's treatment of Jesus as Mother, I will touch upon the ways in which a certain school of feminist critics, such as Bynum, *Jesus as Mother* and *Holy Feast*; Liz Herbert McAvoy, "'And thou to whom this Booke Shall Come": Julian of Norwich and her Audience, Past, Present and Future', in *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden and Roger Ellis (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), pp.101-13, (p. 109); and Elizabeth Robertson, 'Medieval Medical Views of Women and Female Spirituality in the *Ancrene Wisse* and Julian of Norwich's *Showings*', in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*, ed. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stanbury (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), pp. 142-67, have interpreted Jesus' blood as menstrual and/or virginal. I will also address David Aers' rebuttal of these interpretations in his 'Humanity of Christ'.

‘sodenly I saw the red bloud trekile downe from under the garlande, hote and freshely, plentuously and lively’ (*Revelation*, 4.1-2). Right at the outset, Julian enlivens a familiar image—a static crucifix, which Watson and Jenkins refer to in their side notes as, ‘typically an effigy, perhaps painted, of Christ on the cross, arms outspread, head slightly to one side, body twisted, with one ankle laid over the other and a single nail transfixing both’²⁴—transporting it from a familiar item of devotion into something much more immediate, present and, as a consequence, disruptive, all through the medium of a slender stream of blood. This fluid, which she tells the reader is plentiful, fresh and alive, snakes its way from still bleeding cuts in a body we are now convinced continues to pulse with life. Instead of letting this first sight of Jesus’ very recognisable form and predicament slip easily into a stock image that has the potential to be mentally filed away and relegated to its place in the ranks of traditional Passion iconography, thus rendering it a fixed object, rather than a viable, dynamic site for her still present and alive beloved, the Thing in Lacanian parlance, Julian introduces an element of mobility that immediately alters not only the appearance of the image, but its very meaning. Through the detail of Christ’s leaking blood, Julian re-animates and thus redefines the object she is describing, transforming it from a static signifier into something which is still in motion and thus resistant to signification. She uses the movement of this bodily fluid to burst the regular boundaries of the image (rather than just to animate or enliven it), thus permitting it to remain open to further liminal penetration beyond its surface strata, its identity as *objet a*, and into the realm where perhaps its elusive divinity, its Lacanian Thing-ness, might temporarily exist.

²⁴ Watson and Jenkins, *Revelation*, p. 130.

In her attempt to ensure that the apprehensions and descriptions of the incarnate Lord, in whom her relentless desire for God initially resides, never congeal into a one-dimensional form or representation, Julian's imagery signals her refusal, as Gillespie and Ross state, to 'accept any reality that could be frozen motionless.'²⁵ In her utilisation of images, Julian does not, as Bruno Latour explains, 'freeze-frame,' or, implementing his definition of this term, she refuses to 'isolate an image out of the flows that [to her] only provide them with their real—their constantly re-realized, re-represented—meaning.'²⁶ As part of this use of imagery that displays a fluidity of movement, Julian repeatedly uses the blood of Christ to liquefy the edges of the forms of the beloved which she represents. This practice sends ripples across the surfaces of accepted meanings and interpretations of the Passion and the Incarnation. Thus, after beginning her visions with a mere trickle of blood, Julian's next evocation of Passion imagery adds greater detail and immediacy to Christ's continued bleeding when, in the seventh chapter, she offers the following description:

The gret droppes of blode felle downe fro under the garlonde
like pelottes, seming as it had comen oute of the veines. And
in the coming oute they were browne rede, for the blode was
full thicke. And in the spreding abrode they were bright rede
(*Revelation*, 7.10-13).

Not content, however, with offering graphic details about the shifting colour and viscosity of the blood that serve to bring the suffering of the stricken Jesus into sharper and more present focus, Julian then proceeds to increase the

²⁵ Gillespie and Ross, 'Apophatic Image', p. 58.

²⁶ Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 123.

volume and intensity of the flow. From a trickle to a series of heavy droplets, all at once the blood becomes a torrent of drenching motion: 'The plentuous hede is like to the droppes of water that falle of the evesing of an house after a grete shower of rain, that falle so thicke that no man may number them with no bodily wit' (*Revelation*, 7.17-19). The initial movement involving the image of Christ that began with a trickle soon grows into a pelting rainstorm, ensuring that the object described cannot freeze into a static symbol capable of choking off one's desire. In this example Julian, as she often does throughout the course of her texts, employs familiar and even domestic motifs to draw one into her frame of reference—in this instance by evoking a concrete and easily identifiable scene of rain falling on the eaves of a house. Just as characteristically, Julian's imagery manages to unnerve and destabilise, as, after being drawn in, one realises that the familiar rain shower that she has depicted is actually composed not of floods of water, but of torrents of blood—and not just any blood, but the supposedly sacred and life-giving blood of Christ. Furthermore, with its moving borders the image of the copiously bleeding crucifix remains open to welcome the presence (or absence in the form of a Lacanian return to the lack or gap) of the Thing, of God, and thus retains its status as stimulant and receptacle of desire.

Finally, as Julian's visions of the Passion draw near to their climactic resolution (in yet another unexpectedly open-ended image that will be discussed next), the blood that has kept the images of Christ in a state of liquidity now begins to flood from his body in such quantities and with such force that it seems as if it may wash away altogether all figurations of her

beloved, as well as the bed upon which she lies, outside the parameters of her visions, witnessing these sights. She exclaims:

The hote blode ranne out so plentuously that ther was neither
seen skinne ne wounde, but as it were all blode. And when it
cam wher it shuld have falle down, ther it vanished.

Notwithstanding, the bleding continued a while till it might be
seen with avisement. And this was so plentuous to my sight
that methought, if it had ben so in kinde and in substance for
that time, it shulde have made the bedde all on bloude, and
have passede over all about (*Revelation*, 12.3-8).

Here Julian manages to, once again, draw one into the world of her visions by describing the dramatic increase in the outpouring of blood that she is witnessing, in terms that are tangible and sensual—such as her claim that Jesus’ flesh, and even the seeping wound itself, have disappeared beneath the rising tide of blood. However, as before, and as often occurs throughout her texts, Julian’s palpable, sensual imagery leads one into an experience that, whilst it may at first convince one of the familiarity of what is being depicted, soon jars one out of any sense of recognition, when one realises the connotations of what is actually being described—in this case a virtual cascade of Jesus’ still-hot blood that would have swamped Julian entirely, had it not somehow managed to fade away into nothingness just before reaching her bed.

By this juncture, having already employed many metaphors of liquidity to inject a sense of mobility into the images that convey her perceptions of the desired Thing as Christ, Julian ratchets up the intensity of motion by deploying a flood of blood so copious and powerful that it threatens not only to pierce the

boundaries of the trope she seeks to transgress on her way to *jouissance*, but also to shatter the borders of the showing itself, overflowing into the space of her sickbed in a deluge of blood that would have engulfed her. By continually raising the bar in this way, by increasing the mobility of her images to portray a Christ who in his labile state points at the true source and destination of her desire, the Thing itself that she craves and yet can never entirely capture either in words or experience, Julian attempts to ensure that the imagery evokes an object that remains ever open for the process of mutual interpenetration that alone offers the possibility of fleetingly grasping the desired essence within its still fluid borders.

Having seemingly exhausted the possibilities afforded her by the motif of liquidity within her Passion imagery by literally draining Christ's body dry, Julian then embarks upon a lengthy description of the progressive and torturous drying out of Jesus' body (*Revelation*, 16.2-24, 17.5-21 and 17.24-30). Yet, even after siphoning off every last ounce of Christ's blood and the fluidity of motion it had allowed her, Julian still manages to inject movement into this scene of encroaching desiccation and aridity by focusing on the progressive shifts in Jesus' facial colour and the impending fall of tendrils of rapidly dehydrating skin that cling to the crown of thorns by an increasingly tenuous thread. She describes this process in a typically palpable and realistic manner, stating:

I saw that the swet skinne and the tender flesh, with the here
and with the blode, was alle rased and losede above with the
thornes, and broken in many pecis, and were hanging as they
wolde hastely have fallen downe while it had kinde moister...

Wherethorow it was broken on peces as a cloth and sagging

downwarde, seming as it wolde hastely have fallen for hevines
and for loosenes (*Revelation*, 17.13-15 and 19-21).

The level of concrete detail that Julian offers here—such as her in-depth focus upon the way in which the thorns have torn and loosened the skin on Christ’s head and the manner in which the desiccation of this flesh has resulted in pieces of dried and separated skin, or her attention to the weight and texture of the loosened skin which is just about to give in to gravity—manages to bring the well-known story of Jesus’ suffering tangibly, ingeniously and horrifyingly to life. Again, Julian employs recognisable and domestic imagery—that of ripped cloth or clothing, something that most people, from any era, could surely identify with—to create a metaphor that simultaneously lulls and draws one in with its commonplace resonances, even as it shocks and sickens with the realisation that what is actually sagging and just about to fall is the torn and rapidly withering skin of Christ.

Aers finds this image of the flapping dermis and its imminent plunge extraordinarily strange because of Julian’s seemingly detached and unemotional fascination with a detail that seems so disconnected from Christ’s pain and from the overall significance of his forthcoming death.²⁷ However, although I concur that the treatment of this image represents a shift in tone from the affective to a more abstract, speculative viewpoint, I believe that this fits very well with Julian’s intention to insert movement into even the most static of images or objects. I will address more fully, at a later stage in this chapter, the larger point that Aers is making, in regards to Julian’s shift from the affective to the

²⁷ Aers, ‘Humanity of Christ’, p. 89.

speculative and what that portends for her authorial position, with this commentary.

Even when the Passion sequences approach what would seem to be their inevitable and inescapable conclusion, Jesus' death, Julian refuses to allow such an end which would have, at last, have required her imagery to assume a fixed form. Her insistence on maintaining an element of mobility within her depictions of the sought, desired God, in order to enable the Thing hidden within the objects portrayed to remain alive, viable and accessible to those unsatisfied with the surface meaning or aspect, creates an unusual resolution to Julian's Passion sequences. After having brought Christ to the very brink of his demise, in a stop-and-start peroration that has elapsed over twenty-one chapters, Julian leads the reader and Jesus right to the very precipice of his mortality and then simply backs away. Without explanation as to why her visions have chosen to skip over or move right past any figuration of the expired Christ, including the usual scenes of the bruised and battered body being brought down from the cross and lovingly entombed within the sepulchre from which it will soon emerge triumphant, Julian's text simply keeps Jesus alive, in what Aers calls, 'a truly idiosyncratic choice.'²⁸ She signals this rather original narrative depiction with a discussion of the movement, the change, she witnesses coming over Christ's face, stating: 'And right in the same time methought by seming that the life might no lenger last, and the shewing of the ende behoved nedes to be nye—sodenly, I beholding in the same crosse, he changed in blisseful chere' (*Revelation*, 21.6-9). Having come right up to the point of Christ's climactic, and wholly expected death, therefore, Julian swerves

²⁸ Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 90.

away from it. Instead of describing the extinction of Jesus' body, she enigmatically focuses on a movement in his facial expression—a change that suffuses Christ's face with bliss. Rather than the ecstasy of one whose suffering has ended, a static imprint of blessed relief stamped upon the face as the soul departs the body, this blissful expression, Julian implies, actually points to an escape from and triumph over death itself.

Unwilling, even at this most important of moments, the point when the Incarnation attains its most sacred meaning, to allow an open site of desire in which the Thing can still cavort and beckon to become closed off through the medium of death and all the tropes that would imply, Julian instead takes the somewhat radical step of keeping Christ (and thus the Thing within his form) alive. Characteristically, she pulls off this feat by offering a gesture of figural movement embodied in the changing 'chere' of her beloved.

Another example of a type of mobility with which Julian imbues her images, in an attempt to maintain the viability and accessibility of the desired quantity hidden within the objects they represent, can be found in her treatment of the Lord and Servant vision. This vision, which appears solely in *Revelation*, due to the fact that it came to her only after years of contemplation, in answer to her doubts and questions about God's statements to her that sin does not exist and that all will be well,²⁹ offers Julian a means to resolve the extremely knotty issues of how to reconcile the theodicy of her visions with that of prevailing Church teachings. However, it also evidences Julian employing another technique of imagistic motion. This one involves the substitution of one

²⁹ Based on Julian's words in chapter 51, she received this visionary insight in approximately 1388. For more on this, see: McAvoy, "God forbade", p. 3.

object for another within a single image which keeps shifting in appearance and meaning with each change of identity in a visual example of a Lacanian metonymy of desire. In this case, the sought Thing is displaced from object to object within the morphing form of the servant who, at one time or another, Julian identifies as Adam, Jesus and all of humankind before then, somehow, simultaneously cohering all of the above into one being whose very existence in a single moment in space and time would seem to pose a threat to the very continuum of temporality itself.

Initially, when Julian first introduces the role of the servant in this vision, she starts off by clearly naming him as Adam (*Revelation*, 51.114), the first man, he who is held partially responsible for the Original Sin that occasioned humanity's fall from grace. The version of the servant as Adam which Julian offers displays the quite concrete and straightforward attributes of a labourer from the Middle Ages. In fact, according to Isabel Davis, Julian 'reflects contemporary social and economic concerns' about people of this status, in that 'the agricultural worker, in her vision, is depicted as a man in pain,'³⁰ experienced when he falls rushing to obey his lord's bidding. The servant wears the humble, stained attire of a lowly worker, which Julian describes in great detail as, 'a whit kirtel, singel, olde, and alle defauted, dyed with swete of his body, straite fitting to him and shorte, as it were an handful beneth the knee, bare, seeming as it shuld sone be worne uppe, redy to be ragged and rent' (*Revelation*, 51.142-4).

³⁰ Isabel Davis, 'Consuming the Body of the Working Man in the Later Middle Ages', in *Consuming Narratives: Gender and Monstrous Appetite in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Teresa Walters (Cardiff: University of Cardiff Press, 2002), pp. 42-53, (p. 46).

Yet even this seemingly unambiguous rendering of the servant as Adam foreshadows the much more complex range of forms and meanings he will exhibit and already does contain. Almost immediately after portraying this servant's clothing and marvelling at its unsuitability, Julian proceeds to inject some doubt into our understanding of just exactly who this person truly is when she switches to a view of his inner features. She states, 'And inward: in him was shewed a ground of love, which love he had to the lorde that was even like to the love that the lord had to him' (*Revelation*, 51.146-8). Surely a person capable of loving God as much as God loves him (an amount Julian has already repeatedly assured us is beyond measure) is no ordinary servant, no normal man. Already the simple image, ostensibly representing an object unworthy of Julian's desire, begins to show signs of actually portraying someone or some-Thing else entirely.

The suspicion that the shifting image of the servant might actually be pointing at a quantity beyond the original object quickly begins to be justified when Julian abruptly and without warning transforms the simple identification of this servant, this common gardener accustomed to delving and toiling in the earth (*Revelation*, 51.164-70), from Adam to a compound identity that comprises Christ and the sum total of all Christian humanity. With the deceptively simple words, 'In the servant is comprehended the seconde person of the trinite, and in the servant is comprehended Adam: that is to sey, all men' (*Revelation*, 51.179-80), Julian explodes the formerly static walls that had composed her image and constituted its meaning as to the identity and significance of the figure of the servant. In one retroactive swoop she manages to unravel the valueless status of the original servant as object and replace it

with a new, infinitely complex and priceless entity whose visage seems to shimmer translucently, rejecting the concretisation of one particular form. Instead, it morphs back and forth between the fallen Adam, the triumphant Christ in heaven and the transitional, undefined magnitude of a mass of endless human beings, who might at one moment assume the attributes of fallen mankind and in the next the vast, spotless perfection of the risen God. Aside from effecting an almost vertiginous sense of uncertainty in regards to how one is meant to view this threefold guise of the servant, Julian has managed to, yet again, rob us of the ability to get stuck upon one image, one object, thus cutting off access to the sought divinity, the infinitely moving target that is (and is not) Lacan's desired Thing.

Dialectical Application of Modes of Spiritual Seeking

Another manner in which intense desire for God or the Thing manifests in the texts of Julian of Norwich occurs in her non-linear utilisation of all three of the prevalent medieval modes of spirituality.

These three methods of approaching God are usually categorised in a teleological, linear fashion. This can be evinced from Turner's explanation of why Julian's accounts do not fit within the accustomed or normative staged, upward path of spiritual progress. He states:

Absent from Julian is any description of the "threefold way" of purgative, illuminative, and unitive stages to be found in the fourteenth-century Carthusian Hugh of Balma; absent are the three rungs of the ladder of ascent to union with God—the animal, rational, and spiritual—of William of St. Thierry...

Nothing of these kinds is to be found in Julian: there is in her writings no sense of a delineable spiritual trajectory.³¹

Whilst I agree that Julian does not present anything resembling a classical three-pronged spiritual climb, I do wish to offer evidence that she, nonetheless, does employ a form of all three of these spiritual modes in her attempt to draw nearer to the divinity she so desired. I would like to equate these three modes, in the discussion of how they manifest in Julian's texts, to the affective (or emotion-based focus on the embodied, physical Christ), the intellectual or speculative and the unitive forms of spirituality which were all being employed and written about during the late Middle Ages in which Julian had her visions and related them in book form.

Furthermore, I contend that a Lacanian perspective on desire throws into relief Julian's non-linear, dialectical approach. Additionally, although the path she narrates fails to follow the usual ascent leading straight up a pre-defined spiritual ladder, still I believe that it is possible to trace an overall upward or evolutionary trend within the revelations and theological conclusions Julian recounts. This can be seen in that, although the structure of the texts and the understandings they describe might be recursive and even, at times, reflexive, they appear to reveal a sustained, overall growth in comprehension and apprehension of the sought God's nature, as well as about theological matters, such as the meaning of sin or the composition of the human soul, played out as each work progresses individually and which can especially be witnessed in the textual evolutions evident between the earlier, *Vision*, and the later, *Revelation*.

³¹ Turner, *Julian*, p. 136.

Before addressing the manner in which the application of these spiritual modes defy traditional sequencing within Julian's works, I would first like to provide evidence that they all do actually occur in her texts. In deference to the scaled fashion in which they are usually represented, it would probably be logical to start with the mode of spirituality most often placed on the lowest rung of the ladder of medieval spiritual ascent—affective worship.³²

Considered, both in medieval times and from the perspective of modern scholarship, to be largely the precinct of female mystics, the affective strain of late-medieval worship, as well as the genre of literature it produces, relies on a sense-based focus, usually on the embodied Jesus, intended to forge an emotional connection to God. As Sarah McNamer elucidates, saying of this devotional form, 'it insists on imaginative performance as a primary means of producing emotion, casting the reader as eyewitness to the events of the Passion as they unfold in relentless narrative sequence.'³³ This would typically involve a practice wherein the devotee imaginatively trains her or his mind intently upon the suffering Christ (although the focus could alternatively be trained upon Nativity or Marian themes as well). Aided by images or narrative sequences laid out for the purpose, in religious art or in books such as Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, the devotional worshipper, in effect, begins to share compassionately in the pain and anguish of the sought beloved, thus attaining a sort of communion with him (or her).

³² Yet Beckwith offers a defence of this mode from a feminist perspective, addressing its prevalence and popularity in the late-medieval period, 'Material Mysticism', pp. 34-57.

³³ Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), p. 29.

Julian's narratives are replete with instances that would fit comfortably within the tradition of affective worship. In fact, as discussed in the previous section, Julian begins her entire narrative account, in both texts, with a reminiscence about having begged God in her youth for several boons, one of which was an experience of Christ's Passion, a request she apparently viewed as unusual, due to her longing to be bodily present at the crucifixion, rather than just a witness to it in her imagination (*Revelation*, 2.5-16). As a result of these youthful prayers, Julian informs us, she is drawn into the sickbed visions that comprise the foundation of her books and thus the basis for all of the theological ideas and spiritual apprehensions that ensue from them. Proceeding from this affective beginning, Julian's active engagement with affective piety continues throughout almost the whole first third of her works, as she weaves her narrative around recurring portrayals of Christ's Passion. These scenes, true to the genre, are filled with descriptions of Jesus' torments, humiliations and terrible bodily suffering, as he meets his fate upon the crucifix.

Also faithful to this mode are Julian's claims to have solicited and, to varying degrees, won a level of compassionate identification with the embodied Christ, the ostensible object of her desire. One particularly poignant example of this can be found following her report on the extended and extraordinarily excruciating drying out process of Jesus' body. She states:

The shewing of Cristes paines filled me fulle of paines... And in alle this time of Cristes presens, I felte no paine but for Cristes paines... Here felt I sothfastly that I loved Crist so much above myselfe that ther was no paine that might be suffered like to that sorow that I had to see him in paine (*Revelation*, 17.41-4 and 50-2).

Without a doubt, Julian is here laying claim to a compassionate and physically experienced, if imaginatively wrought, connection to Christ, one that enables her to attain a level of communion with him through sharing in and assuming his suffering. Thus, through her focus on scenes of Christ's Passion replete with concrete details of his bodily suffering and through her accounts, such as the one cited above, of sharing in the pain of his Passion, Julian's texts clearly display elements of conventional affective worship. Whilst this mode of piety was extremely popular in Julian's day, it was not considered to represent a very high level of spiritual acumen or attainment. Due to its exclusive concentration on Jesus' physicality and on the emotions as a means to approach God, according to Michael Sargent, 'meditation on the life of the incarnate Christ was advisable primarily for the physically minded, who were unable to think of spiritual things—for carnal men, for novices and for women.'³⁴ Initially theologians such as Bernard of Clairvaux had envisioned affective worship as an incipient step on the mystical path—a process that would allow 'carnal men who were unable to love [God] in any other way [to experience]... the salutary love of his own humanity, and then gradually to raise them to a spiritual love.'³⁵ Yet, due to its relegation to the laity, women and the uneducated, by the late fourteenth century this devotional method often stood alone as a practice and in books. After all, its lowly reputation most likely discouraged scholarly and clerical participation and the hurdles required to ascend to the next levels of intellectual and unitive pursuit would effectively have cut off access to those

³⁴ Michael G. Sargent, ed., *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ/ Nicholas Love* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2005), p. x.

³⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, vol. I, trans. Kilian Walsh and Irene Edmonds (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1971), p. 152.

most drawn to affective worship in the first place. Aers expresses the validity of this assessment when he concludes that, in the period in which Julian lived and wrote, this type of piety had, in general, become, 'a mode that was traditionally organized to produce intense affective and emotional responses followed by a redirection of the will in a manner that circumvented the analytical process of rational exploration.'³⁶ Thus, rather than being an incipient stage on a threefold path, one that would enable an aspirant to progress from the inferior physical stratum to higher planes of mental reflection on divinity, the affective mode actually, it seems, had become a terminal stage in its own right, one that could serve as an impediment to, or substitute for, intellectual questing.

Nevertheless, in contrast to many contemporary devotional authors, a large percentage of them women, who wrote about their engagement with the affective mode, Julian does not confine the scope of her texts to the purely emotional or affective realm. Instead, she also pursues her desired God using the more highly regarded and male-dominated intellectual and unitive strains as well.

Whilst affective piety appears to have been associated largely with women in the Middle Ages, the intellectual pursuit of God, the attempt to approach the divine through attaining an understanding of his nature, seems to have been most often linked to men.³⁷ Building upon centuries of precedent born in the Patristic era, strengthened by a long period of monastic practice throughout Western Europe and expanded within the evolving scholastic

³⁶ Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 85.

³⁷ For more on this association of the masculine with the intellectual, see: Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 15 and 'Medieval Mysticism', p. 39; as well as Watson, 'Desire for the Past', p. 80.

system within the burgeoning universities, a well-established and strictly delineated tradition of intellectual spiritual seeking was already firmly in place by the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries.³⁸

Although Julian clearly does not follow the systematic mode of scholastic or monastic argument—which called for offering a nuanced position, argued in a linear and structured manner, and arrived at by reading and responding to or glossing scripture and accepted authoritative doctrinal sources³⁹—Julian does display her own form of thinking about God which earns her a place within the intellectual mode. One simply has to expand the parameters of the definition of this spiritual methodology somewhat to find where she fits within its borders.

That Julian manifests an intellectual technique at all can best be ascertained from the fact that she spent, by her own reckoning (*Revelation*, 51.73), close to twenty years refining and revising the ideas she first began to express in her earlier account, *A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman*, and transforming them into a complex and sophisticated set of theological tenets and conclusions, which form the intellectual heart of the much-expanded second version of her showings, *A Revelation of Love*. Based on the evidence offered by the added, reworked or expanded material (*Revelation* is six times longer than *Vision*⁴⁰), which only appears in her second text, Julian spent at least two decades engaged in systematic contemplation of her original revelatory experiences and conclusions. In this case, I contend that she chases her desire using the intellect as a means to draw closer to the sought entity, which has now

³⁸ For more on this tradition see: Turner, *Julian*, pp. 5-8.

³⁹ Turner, *Julian*, pp. 3-9.

⁴⁰ Windeatt, 'Second Thoughts', p. 101.

assumed the guise of something that can be reached only through understanding.

The particular manner in which Julian prosecutes this intellectual phase of her search (evidence of which, as I will show later, occurs intermittently, rather than linearly, throughout her texts) situates her tenuously within a certain area of practice common to the medieval intellectual mode of spirituality. Turner, paraphrasing Davies' idea on this subject,⁴¹ states:

Julian's style of continuous theological elaboration, both within each of the two versions of her work, the Short and the Long texts, and even more evidently in the massive expansion of the first that is found in the second, shows marked similarities with the monastic meditative practice of *lectio divina* and its expansion into spiritual/mystical commentary on scripture.⁴²

Lectio divina refers to the medieval monastic practice of meditating on an aspect of Christ's life, usually drawn from scripture, in such a way as actively to invite greater insight into the scene from Jesus' story that is being depicted and also into the more profound nature of God, himself. As applied to the case of Julian of Norwich, Turner opines that in place of a Biblical focus upon which to concentrate her meditation, 'the material of her shewings does duty for the scriptural text.'⁴³ In the same vein, Gillespie and Ross, whilst also comparing Julian's intellectual technique to the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, offer the opinion that Julian 'is meditating on pictures and words formed in her

⁴¹ Davies, 'Transformational', pp. 39-52.

⁴² Turner, *Julian*, p. 9.

⁴³ Turner, *Julian*, p. 149.

understanding rather than written texts.⁴⁴ Thus, some consensus exists that, though lacking the formal monastic or scholastic training available only to males in her era,⁴⁵ Julian nonetheless manages to incorporate and adapt elements of the process of *lectio divina* in order to pursue her desired understanding of God in an intellectual manner. In place of scriptural passages, Julian substituted the images and words borne of her own showings.

Yet, despite the unorthodox focus of her meditations, Julian apparently employed many aspects of the monastic methodology when considering her chosen subject matter. An example of this involves the faculty of memory, something the monks stressed highly as part of their meditative process. The concept of memory in the Middle Ages differed significantly from our modern definition. Its meaning evolved from that in use during classical antiquity when, as Mary Carruthers explains, '*Memoria* meant, at that time, trained memory... [whose] fundamental principle is to "divide" the material to be remembered into pieces short enough to be recalled in single units and to key these into some sort of rigid, easily reconstructable order.'⁴⁶ Adapted in the Christian era by patristic writers for use in their exploration of scripture and formulation of doctrine, memory began to take on the added features of imagination and creativity. Augustine exemplifies the expanded meaning of the term when employed in this way:

⁴⁴ Gillespie and Ross, 'Apophatic Image', p. 58.

⁴⁵ However, Edmund Colledge and James Walsh do speculate, representing one end of the critical spectrum on this topic, that Julian had been educated in Latin, the scriptures and the spiritual classics, in both Latin and the vernacular, as part of an education received, in their opinion, from the Benedictine nuns at Carrow. See: *A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich* (Toronto: Political Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1978), p. 44.

⁴⁶ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.7.

These things do I within the chamber of my memory... [where lies]
all which I remember, either by personal experience or on the faith
of others. Out of the same supply do I myself with the past
construct now this, now that likeness of things, which either I have
experienced, or, from having experienced, have believed... and
upon all these again do I meditate as if they were present.⁴⁷

During its monastic usage in the Middle Ages, as Carruthers points out, this type of memory 'recognizes the essential roles of emotion, imagination, and cogitation within the activity of recollection.'⁴⁸ Memory of this sort would have been invaluable to Julian as she reviewed and revised her revelations and the ideas that they had spawned over and over again through the decades she spent contemplating them. Turner concurs about the important role that memory plays in Julian's intellectual process, as part of her own version of *lectio divina*, when he comments that whilst 'Julian does not, as Augustine did, make memory a central and explicit topos of her *Revelation*... this was hardly necessary, because there are some obvious senses in which the work as a whole is an exercise of memory's power.'⁴⁹ Therefore, like the monastic tradition from which she was excluded, Julian's use of memory would have proved crucial to her own intellectual process.

Additional proof of Julian's engagement in intellectual spirituality can be found in the refinements and additions to her first account which show up in her second, *Revelation*, and which, according to Baker, 'transform the primarily

⁴⁷ Augustine, *Confessions*, transl. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 186-7.

⁴⁸ Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 2.

⁴⁹ Turner, *Julian*, p. 153.

devotional short text into the theologically sophisticated long text.⁵⁰ Some of the changes that Julian made between the first and second versions of her texts that provide evidence of a process of intellectual honing and creativity include her insertion of analytical and often complex explanations as supplements to what were previously simple recordings of visionary material and the addition of the Lord and Servant parable with its theologically complex layers of meanings and resonances.

An example of the first type of textual augmentation or self-glossing mentioned above, the introduction of cerebral commentary, occurs right away in her first revelation when, after what was presented in *Vision* as a straightforward description of the initial sight of Christ coming to life with the trickling of blood, Julian transforms in *Revelation*, by adding a far-reaching and abstract remark about the Trinity, stating:

And in the same shewing, sodeinly the trinity fulfilled my hart most of joy. And so I understode it shall be in heaven without end, to all that shall come ther. For the trinity is God, God is the trinity. The trinity is our maker, the trinity is our keper, the trinity is our everlasting lover, the trinity is our endlesse joy and our blisse, by our lord Jesu Christ and in our lord Jesu Christ. And this was shewed in the first sight and in all. For wher Jhesu appireth the blessed trinity is understand, as to my sight (*Revelation*, 4.6-12).

Julian, in this instance, transforms what in her earlier text had been a simple recording of visionary experience into an infinitely more complicated rumination on the profound, abstract definition of what constitutes the true

⁵⁰ Baker, *Vision to Book*, p.62.

nature of God, a tripartite being that enfolds Jesus and yet is represented in its entirety by Christ all at the same time.

Another example of Julian contemplating her own visions as evidenced by the textual changes between books appears as part of her reflection on the best way for human beings to seek and behold God, when, after asking God for more physical light to better see Jesus' suffering face (*Revelation*, 10.8-9)—a request that in *Vision* had been answered with the succinct teaching that 'if God walde shew me mare he shulde, botte me neded na light botte him' (*Vision*, 8.7-8)—in *Revelation* gives rise to an extended and highly involved theoretical exploration of how best to approach and apprehend the very deepest reaches of God's essential being. The added passages take one on an intellectually involved journey that includes a trip to the ocean floor, the repeated contemplation of putrescent flesh (representing the sin that clouds our ability to perceive the truth of God's nature) and the recurring metaphor of the vernacle, or the cloth upon which Christ's face was supposedly imprinted on his trek to the crucifixion (*Revelation*, 10.10-82). What began in *Vision*, therefore, as a relatively uncomplicated, though still subtle, response to a physical dilemma grows in *Revelation* into an extremely intricate set of interconnecting ideas, each with several layers of meaning.

This form of textual accretion, represented by passages replete with intellectual commentary, appears repeatedly throughout *Revelation*, offering clear evidence that Julian devoted untold days, hours and years to meditating and ruminating upon the images and information that she received from her original visions. That the technique she used to do this bore a resemblance to the monastic practice of *lectio divina* gains further support when one considers

that one of the fruits of the monks' meditations was often reflected in additions to the scriptural sources or texts which they were contemplating. 'In this process of textualizing, the original work acquires commentary and gloss,'⁵¹ according to Carruthers. And this is, as discussed above, exactly what can be observed in the carefully thought out and reasoned additions to Julian's original report and conclusions in *Vision* that comprise a large part of *Revelation*.⁵²

Aside from the added sections of commentary, which occur throughout *Revelation*, Julian also inserts entire chapters of new material in her later text which did not show up in her earlier one. Davies remarks that these additional passages 'show greater assuredness, doctrinal perception and subtlety on Julian's part and testify to the process of intellectual and spiritual maturation which she underwent in the period between the completion of the texts.'⁵³ Invariably the added segments, such as chapters thirty-two to thirty-six and chapters forty-four to sixty-three, offer extremely sophisticated and speculative reflections on certain aspects of her revelations. In these chapters one finds some of the most evolved examples of Julian's thought, such as her discussion of Jesus as Mother (*Revelation*, chapters 57-62) and her intricately nuanced telling of the Lord and Servant parable, which comprises the entirety of chapter fifty-one.

Apart from the intellectual evolution evidenced by the changes added to Julian's later work from her former, one also finds examples that Julian engaged

⁵¹ Carruthers, *Book of Memory*, p. 11.

⁵² For more on Julian's textual additions and glossing of her own original Short Text in a similar fashion to the theological commentary in the margins of manuscripts that was a widespread medieval practice, see: Karnes, 'Art of Interpretation', pp. 333-63.

⁵³ Davies, 'Transformational', p. 41.

in a deliberate and sustained process of contemplating her desired God, her sought Thing, in the incredible sophistication of her resultant theology. Whether exploring thorny questions about the existence of sin (*Revelation*, 11.24-48) or laying out the case for humanity's double nature (*Revelation*, 19.21-32), which she later ingeniously connects to the dual divinity of the incarnate and yet transcendent Christ (31.17-41), Julian displays a level of subtle reasoning and a complexity of thought which would suggest that she thoroughly focused upon aspects and elements of her desired God through the medium of the intellect, as well as that of the emotions.⁵⁴

Having offered evidence that Julian's texts exhibit elements of both the affective and intellectual spiritual modes, I would now like to show that they also contain aspects of the unitive strain. This third type of spiritual or mystical activity, which in the phased or linearly teleological model of medieval spirituality represents the highest rung on the ladder, refers to an apprehension of God that is arrived at through the rejection of all active striving to comprehend or represent the divine.

Popularised by Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century, and still very influential in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this path of seeking the desired divine teaches that 'a state of union with God was attainable, however briefly, in this life.'⁵⁵ The most important characteristics of this mystical mode include the tenets that this state of union with divinity is not attainable through

⁵⁴ For commentary on Julian's use of the intellect in her texts, see: Abbott, *Autobiography and Theology*, p. xii; Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 81; Baker, *Vision to Book*, p. 16; Davies, 'Transformational', pp. 41 & 44; and Windeatt, 'Second Thoughts', pp. 102-3.

⁵⁵ Nicholas Watson, 'The Middle English Mystics', in *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 539-565, (p. 545).

anything that human beings can do, but is only reachable as a result of God's grace; that it lies far beyond the capability of the human mind or language to capture or convey; and that it can only be sustained for very brief, albeit unimaginably intense, intervals in this life. Despite these stipulations, it was accepted in Julian's day that it was possible to become '*unus spiritus*, "one spirit" with God, or "one in the Spirit."⁵⁶ Thus, in the era in which Julian experienced and wrote about her visions and the contemplations they wrought, it would have been eminently possible for a spiritual seeker to imagine and long for a fusing with the aim of her intense desire.

The unitive mode is often connected with exalted speculative reasoning—many times taking the form of written exhortations to renounce intellectualisation being delivered by those who had already attained supreme heights of theological thought, such as in the cases of Meister Eckhart, in the early fourteenth century, or the *Cloud* author, in the late fourteenth century—and its requirement that it be described in a deceptively simple, yet often complex language of unsaying (reflecting the fact that, as its adherents maintain repeatedly, God could not be described or attained through the fallen communication of mankind). Many authors associated with this strain appear to have been males, such as the writers mentioned above. Yet, Julian of Norwich's texts display evidence that she participated in this third mode of spiritual aspiration.

Indeed, a strong unitive thread runs throughout Julian's texts, and is especially developed in *Revelation*. Most often this manifests in the form of a theme that stresses an inherent and innate connection between humanity and

⁵⁶ Turner, *Julian*, p. 214.

divinity. Jantzen reflects on this when she says, 'Undoubtedly the subject of union with God dominated her reflections during the twenty years it took to achieve an understanding of the revelations and complete the long text.'⁵⁷ Julian grounds her belief in the possibility of union between humankind and the divine in her well-constructed conception of the two parts of human nature (*Revelation*, 19.21-32), the outward aspect (or the 'sensualite'), which corresponds to the physical, sense-based side of humanity (and which she later redeems, in chapter 51 of *Revelation* by associating it with the servant who represents Adam of original sin and yet becomes Christ and humankind), and the inward part (or the 'substance') which is already united to God since it is made of God and nothing but God. Of this inner side, Julian states, 'I sawe no difference between God and oure substance, but as it were all God' (54.13). Our substance, therefore, which is one side of our nature, consists solely of the qualities that she equates with divinity.

As a result of the dual composition of our being, one of the main goals that Julian outlines in her texts as the central aim for her own spiritual journey and as the target that she sets for her readers, her 'evencristen,' is the recognition of the inherent sovereignty of the inward part over the outward. For, after all, it is in this side of the human composition that, according to Julian, 'alle the intent and the wille is set endlesly to be oned to our lorde Jhesu' (*Revelation*, 19.29). Asserting the power of the substance over the sensuality, furthermore, ought not to be difficult, since as Julian claims: 'That the outward party sholde drawe the inward to assent was not shewde to me. But that the inwarde party draweth the outward party, by grace, and both shalle be oned in

⁵⁷ Jantzen, *Mystic and Theologian*, p. 35.

blisse without ende by the vertu of Christ, this was shewde' (*Revelation*, 19.30-2), although not necessarily in this life.

Thus, to sum up her own argument: human beings are comprised of two parts. The lower part (or 'sensualite') is intended to, and by all rights should, be governed by the higher part (or 'substance') which is nothing other than the very essence of divinity itself. It seems clear that, with these arguments, Julian is proposing a pre-existing connection between God and humanity, a dormant intersection that, if re-opened, will result in union with the divine, perhaps experienced only in fleeting moments of bliss in this life, but definitely available in a more permanent, even infinite, fashion once the soul has left the body and reunited with the divine in heaven.

Not only does Julian, in this way, theoretically lay the framework for unitive experience within her texts, she also offers examples of her own brief moments of ecstasy, which could represent an intimation of union with divinity. These fleeting flashes of unsurpassable peace or joy occur infrequently throughout the texts. Yet, the intensity and plenitude of these depicted experiences cause them to stand out, such as, in the seventh revelation, when she describes a moment of this type, saying, 'This feling was so glad and so gostely that I was all in peese, in eese, and in reste, that ther was nothing in erthe that shulde have greved me' (*Revelation*, 15.3-4). Another such self-described experience of bliss comes further along in the same revelation when she declares, 'oure blessed lorde gave me again the comfort and the rest in soule: liking and sekernesse so blisseful and so mighty that no drede, ne sorrow, ne no paine bodily ne gostely that might be suffered shulde have dissesede me' (*Revelation*, 15.9-11). These instances of all-encompassing

delight—which Laura Miles refers to as the ‘pinnacle of divine union [when] self and other collapse into each other’⁵⁸—are so powerful, according to Julian, that they can even remove the physical pain of a woman on her near-deathbed. In fact, almost everything dissolves in the timelessness of these brief moments of unity. In their intensity, their fleeting nature and their inability to be fully, if at all, described in words, these descriptions of unity, which appear to represent the momentary touching of the desired God or Thing, mirror very closely Lacan’s definition of *jouissance*, in its signification as a temporary episode of transporting (and transgressive) ecstasy which catapults one into another state or register, beyond the limits of language or everyday experience.⁵⁹

The attainment of this oft-evoked union forms the explicit goal of the spiritual journey Julian’s texts portray. It is this unitive outcome, above all else, that Julian claims most to desire. Thus *this* is the very heart of the Thing, one could speculate, that she chases so relentlessly through morphing, melting and metonymic objects. And in those rare times when she does manage to draw near enough to apprehend the sought God, the desired Thing—through one or a combination of affective, intellectual or unitive means—her desire is answered in flashes of instantaneous *jouissance* that overtake her completely, but for just a few seconds, and then recede as quickly as they have come, leaving her bereft and with a renewed desire more insatiable than before, fuelled by the need to once again merge with her beloved. Julian depicts this process of attaining *jouissance* and then losing it on several separate occasions throughout her texts.

⁵⁸ Miles, ‘Space and Enclosure’, p. 157.

⁵⁹ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 177.

She expresses her confusion and grief at seemingly having fused with the true object of her desire, in recurrent moments of 'blisseful' communion or 'comfort and... rest in [her] soule' (*Revelation*, 15.9-10), only to have these experiences repeatedly ripped away, when she states of the passing and aftermath of such a moment of transcendent rapture:

This lasted but a while, and I was turned and left to myselfe in
hevines and werines of my life and irkenes of myselfe, that
unneth I could have patience to live. Ther was no comfort ne
none eese to my feling, but faith, hope, and cherite, and these I
had in truth, but fulle litille in feling (*Revelation*, 15.5-8).

Thus, once the joy of union, the blinding flash of *jouissance* has passed, Julian claims that she is then left alone, in a state of abjection at having been abruptly separated from the peace and joy, borne of attaining her desire, with which she had been so recently fully fused. To highlight her point even further, as this episode unfolds, in what Julian interprets as a direct lesson from God, the bestower of *jouissance*, the object of her desire, she receives and is stripped of this ecstatic union twenty more times in succession (*Revelation*, 15.11-13).

The result is an emotional roller coaster of ups and downs whose highs have her feeling inseparable from her beloved and whose lows have her entreating God for salvation from her impending doom (*Revelation* 15.13-16). However, in the end, this tumultuous back-and-forth, between moments of abject separation and blissful merging, has the perhaps paradoxical effect of whetting her appetite to continue longing for God, elevating her desire to new heights. That this pattern of attaining momentary *jouissance*, only to have it fade away,

produces greater desire, as well as a deep sense of loss can be seen when Julian counsels her readers on the need for prayer, saying:

But whan oure curtesse lorde of his special grace sheweth
himselpe to oure soule, we have that we desyer. And then we se
not for the time what we shulde more pray, but all oure entent
with alle oure mightes is set hole into the beholding of him...

But whan we se him not so, than fele we nede and cause to
praye, for failing and for abling of oureselfe to Jhesu

(*Revelation*, 43.15-18 and 23-4).

The very rhythm of the text in this passage mirrors the rise and fall of the emotions Julian earlier claimed to experience, in chapter fifteen of *Revelation*, as she, in her soul, repeatedly entered into moments of bliss—which she equated with union with God (and which closely resemble experiences of *jouissance*)—before having them disappear abruptly, leaving her dazed and bewildered, but soon hungering for more. Jantzen perceives this pattern of gain and loss in Julian’s texts in terms of a divine lesson, saying, ‘She experiences the desolation of one who is allowed to feel abandoned by God, and the great comfort and consolation of his loving presence, and sees that God intends both to increase our trust in him.’⁶⁰ As well as possibly augmenting her trust in a benign divinity, from a Lacanian standpoint, it also, perhaps more significantly, amplifies her active and insatiable desire for attainment of union with God or the Thing.

In fact, the ups and downs of these hit-and-run encounters with *jouissance* enflame Julian’s longing to such a degree that, after the passage

⁶⁰ Jantzen, *Mystic and Theologian*, p. 184.

above, she actually arrives at the overarching conclusion that, ‘we can do no more but beholde him, enjoying, with an high, mighty desyer to be alle oned into him’ (*Revelation*, 43.33-4). Thus, the point to the almost dizzying waves of joy and loss, the repeated patterns of bestowal and removal of *jouissance*, Julian tells us is an even stronger, one-pointed desire for the Thing, even if that inevitably brings with it more pain to go along with the pleasure.

Having established that Julian of Norwich’s texts contain evidence of all three modes of medieval mystical aspiration—the affective, intellectual and unitive—I would now like to suggest that these strains appear in a non-linear fashion, as opposed to the more customary scaled or staged ascending format,⁶¹ and examine why that is. It is my contention that the nature of the stated desire for God (or the Thing), which appears to underlie every aspect of the experiences and conclusions described in Julian’s writings, causes her to engage in a pragmatic search for the sought quantity, rather than to follow any

⁶¹ Walter Hilton delineates clearly, in *Walter Hilton: The Scale of Perfection*, J.P.H. Clark and Rosemary Dorward, ed. and trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), pp. 78-83, his orthodox version of the traditionally hierarchical and linear structure of these three strains. He lays out a tripartite and ascending ladder of spiritual seeking, which he introduces by stating, ‘Contemplative life has three parts’, (p. 79). These three stages he further breaks down when after the first part, which is simply a pedestrian urge better to know God, he divides the second part of contemplation which ‘lies principally in affection’, (p. 80) into two sections. The lower level of this second part of contemplation involves affective feeling or longing for God. The second, higher degree, requires meditation and intellectual questing. Finally the third part of contemplation, which Hilton identifies as the highest level of this scaled mystical ascent, ‘lies both in cognition and in affection’, (p. 82) and results in a affinity to God so intense that, ‘by the rapture of this love the soul is for the time united and conformed to the image of the Trinity,’ (p. 82) a clear description of the goal of the unitive strain. Thus, Hilton details a typical late-medieval formulation of the three modes of spiritual seeking—affective, intellectual and unitive—as hierarchical, linear and with each level rigidly segregated from the others. Therefore, in this type of scaled model, once one has attained the next level, s/he would not be expected to ‘descend’ again to the previous, ‘lower’ stage.

particular established methodology or school of thought. Furthermore, I suggest that the up-and-down character of Julian's infinitely yearning encounters with and apprehensions of God—which draw her closer to her sought beloved in self-described experiences of union akin to Lacanian *jouissance* and then pull her away into periods of absence and heightened longing—contributes to the non-linearity of the incidence of these three spiritual modes. This is because she implements them as needed, in order to help her follow and attain an ever-shifting target, momentary tastes of her goal, in the form of *jouissance*, and also aids her in dealing with its loss and then renewing her search again, all in a dialectical, ever-escalating apprehension of God or the Thing. Thus, the dynamic ebb and flow of the spiritual journey depicted in her accounts also results in the creation of a textual structure that, rather than laying out its arguments in a linear or systematic narrative flow, does so in a fashion that has been described by critics in turn as: 'orgasmic,'⁶² circular and spiralling,⁶³ and 'curiously recursive and apparently involuted.'⁶⁴ Suffice it to say that Julian's recounting of her showings does not unfold in a straightforward linear way, starting from stated premises and escalating in orderly arguments to clearly delineated conclusions.

Instead Julian usually proceeds rhetorically by introducing certain themes, often associated with one of the spiritual modes (such as her Passion scenes which are clearly part of the affective style of worship, or her discussion on the nature of sin, which fits within the intellectual strain), and, after devoting a certain amount of time to this theme or motif, she allows the flow of her

⁶² Gillespie and Ross, 'Apophatic Image', p. 62.

⁶³ Turner, *Julian*, p. 4.

⁶⁴ Gillespie, 'Pastiche', p. 192.

narrative—which I contend is primarily pulled and shaped by the imperatives imposed by her desire for a constantly shifting target, the Lacanian Thing—to draw her into a description or exploration of another topic altogether. However, despite the repeated fading in and out of thematic threads and discourses, Julian never leaves an issue unresolved. She always returns to the original points she has started, even if several sections or chapters have passed, in order to flesh out their meaning and explain their place within her overall narration of desire. Examples of this occur when she refers, in chapter seven (*Revelation*, 7.3), back to the mention of Mary that she made in chapter 3 (*Revelation*, 7.3); and when she circles back, in chapter eight, to the notion of the hazelnut-like object (*Revelation*, 8.9-13) that she first introduced in chapter five (*Revelation*, 5.7-13), and which has now become a metonymic stand-in for all of Creation.

In this way, Julian establishes a series of threads within her texts, especially the longer more complex *Revelation*, which, if followed, closely start to intertwine, finally drawing all that she claims to have seen, heard and contemplated together to create, in the end, a unified vision that attempts to present the fruits of all the showings in one overarching message of all-encompassing love. Turner believes that this is part of a dialectical strategy on Julian's part which he posits is 'a, even perhaps the, distinctive feature of her theological method in general. It is a strategy that moves from opposition and difference toward the achievement of a transcendent inclusiveness.'⁶⁵ Other critics see Julian's circling and recursive style of narrative development as part of a literary plan alternately to transmit an affective experience of her

⁶⁵ Turner, *Julian*, p. 199.

showings,⁶⁶ to convey her understanding intellectually,⁶⁷ or even to present her findings in a way that could both challenge and yet still stay within the bounds of orthodox opinion.⁶⁸

Whilst all of these views have their merits, there is another reason that could also explain the non-linear structure of Julian's texts—her need to record the emotional, intellectual and unitive ascents and descents occasioned by her relentless pursuit of her own desired entity, God or, in Lacanian terminology, the Thing. As discussed previously, Julian's commitment to attaining an ever-greater apprehension of God is driven by a burning desire so overwhelming in its need to be fulfilled that it does not distinguish between nor privilege whether that fulfilment comes in the form of the physical, the intellectual or the spiritual. In fact, she famously claims to have received her revelations in the threefold guise of 'bodily sight... worde formede in my understanding, and by gostely sight' (*Revelation*, 9.24-5), which could be interpreted as equating loosely to the affective, intellectual and unitive categories determined above. Therefore, since Julian is being effectively, according to her accounts, spurred on exclusively by her desire for a God that keeps changing form, shape and meaning, it only makes sense that she would pragmatically change tactics, approaches and spiritual modes to best approach and apprehend whatever version of the sought Thing is currently confronting, or evading, her. Hence, I contend, therein lies the source of both Julian's non-linear application of the

⁶⁶ Elizabeth Robertson, 'Julian of Norwich's "Modernist" Style and the Creation of Audience', in *A Companion to Julian of Norwich*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp. 139-53.

⁶⁷ Jantzen, *Mystic and Theologian*, p. 89.

⁶⁸ Gillespie, 'Pastiche', p. 206.

three modes and the undulating structure of the texts that describe her spiritual journey.

Originality of Presentation

A central product or result of the intense desire which Julian of Norwich's texts describe her directing towards God, and which is being viewed in this chapter through the illumination of the Lacanian concept of desire for the Thing, is a tendency towards originality, which reflects her willingness to follow her longing wherever it may take her, regardless of whether the version of divinity revealed or the path to revelation falls within familiar late-medieval spiritual representations or practices. It is precisely this attitude, this one-pointed focus on chasing and attaining her sought desire to the virtual exclusion of all else that, in part, could account for the originality of her works.

That Julian's writings are considered original by many critics seems to be in little doubt. Turner, in his recent book on the theology of Julian of Norwich, declares of *Revelation* that it is 'so singular that it is as unprecedented as it is unrepeatable... [due to its] intellectual disposition, metaphoric range, literary and linguistic style, and sheer fresh energy of thought.'⁶⁹ Others clearly concur in this estimation, though they may direct their comments about Julian's

⁶⁹ Turner, *Julian*, pp. 16-7. Turner is specifically referring, in this quotation, to Julian's texts as being original in relation to other works of contemporary theology. As I have stated before in this chapter (in notes 16 and 20), I do not wish to suggest or imply that Julian's texts are the only ones that display an original approach to the subject of the Passion or devotional topics. Indeed her contemporaries or recent predecessors, such as Langland, Rolle and Porete, produced works which express extremely original positions on similar subjects to the ones that Julian's texts are addressing. However, to reiterate, what I believe that Turner is stating here is that, when viewing Julian's texts as works of theology and comparing them to other traditional theological works, Julian's writings are, in his opinion, extraordinarily original.

originality towards certain elements of her writing rather than to their entirety. Staley, for instance, referring to Julian's presentation of the accounts of the Passion, calls them 'a highly idiosyncratic understanding of the meaning of the Passion.'⁷⁰ Baker expands on this point, when she explains how unusual Julian's treatment of this well-rehearsed story actually is in comparison to other accounts of the day. The accustomed Passion narration⁷¹ usually lays out a well-rehearsed sequence of events arrayed in a chronological path that commences with the Last Supper and proceeds in an orderly, if brutally bloody fashion, all the way to the resurrection. Along the way mandatory stops at certain ritualised portrayals of occurrences, such as the scourging, lancing of the side, death and burial are expected. Baker tells us:

In contrast to the[se] meditative treatises on the Passion, however, Julian does not narrate the entire story of Christ's suffering and death but rather focuses on particular moments. She concentrates on the pains that he endured and makes no mention of his tormentors... [she] describes the results of the scourging instead of the act itself. She sees the blood flowing from the stripes rather than the men inflicting them.⁷²

⁷⁰ Lynn Staley, 'Julian of Norwich and the Crisis of Authority', in David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy: Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1996), pp. 107-78, (p. 127).

⁷¹ Some more typical depictions of the Passion from this period can be found in: Aelred of Rievaulx. *Aelred of Rievaulx's De institutione inclusarum: Two English Versions*, eds John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt (London: Oxford University Press, 1984); and Pseudo-Bonaventure, 'The Privy of the Passion: Bonaventura de mysteriis passionis Iesu Christi,' in *Yorkshire Writers: Richard Rolle of Hampole and His Followers*, ed. C. Horstman (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1895).

⁷² Baker, *Vision to Book*, p. 48.

Baker goes on to point out that Julian's relating of these well-known scenes also departs from the norm by omitting any mention of almost all of the other pivotal personages, such as the other two men being crucified on either side of him, who usually figure so importantly in contemporary medieval literary or artistic depictions of the Passion.

Deviations from the conventional late-medieval Passion narrative also occur in Julian's texts in a myriad of smaller details or presentations, such as her exclusion of the usually obligatory blame and damnation of the Jews in her description of Jesus' crucifixion (*Revelation*, 33.14-18), an omission that is deemed part of Julian's 'quite deliberate idiosyncrasy.'⁷³ Yet other examples of Julian's thematic and stylistic uniqueness exist in the form of unusual facets that she chooses to add or expand upon, rather than those she opts to eliminate, such as her unusual introduction of Jesus' lips (*Revelation*, 16.5) and her embellishment of the crucifixion scene with the incorporation of a 'dry, harre wind' (*Revelation*, 16.10) both uncommon features in Passion narratives.⁷⁴ The list of unusual elements in Julian's texts is too long to list here. Suffice it to say that whilst Julian of Norwich utilises and includes many of the expected elements and motifs of traditional devotional writing, the manner in which she does so often tends to subvert or convert them in order that they may more precisely convey the particularities of her own perception of the events, images and contemplations related in her texts. As Vincent Gillespie opines, 'in Julian's relations to other religious discourses she stands aloof, preferring to reforge her own discourse, to write her own performative utterance using dominant

⁷³ Sutherland, 'Liturgy', p. 97.

⁷⁴ The remarks on the unusualness of both the lips and the wind are from Watson's and Jenkins' side notes on p. 178 of *Revelation*.

religious discourses tactically.⁷⁵ This may reflect the yearning at the heart of Julian's texts, which display an insistence on following the desired God, or Thing, in whatever form or direction it may assume. This willingness to follow her longing, regardless of where it may lead, often results in fresh or unusual takes on familiar late-medieval spiritual episodes or representations.

Julian's commitment to remain faithful to her longing for God, or desire for the Thing, above all else—whether this reveals a series of metonymically shifting images or a new and ever-more-complex theological thought—results in texts, especially the more developed *Revelation*, which describe a spiritual process unafraid to deviate from the norms of contemporary practice. Unsurprisingly, Julian's works often also present fruits of this search which might be considered somewhat unusual or distinct. All of this contributes to the originality of her works. I would now like to explore two facets in *Revelation* (which because of its status as revision of her earlier version of events reflects the fullest development of Julian's ongoing process available for scrutiny) that exemplify the uniqueness of Julian's textual presentation, as a consequence of her yearning approach: her treatment of the motif of Jesus as Mother and her usage of language, both positive and negative.

Julian's Particular Presentation of Jesus as Mother

In and of itself, the fact that Julian chooses to portray Christ as a mother, whilst it may seem unfamiliar to modern sensibilities, was not unprecedented within late-medieval spiritual representations. Although Frances Beer holds that Julian's 'understanding of Jesus as Mother... was (and still is) in direct

⁷⁵ Gillespie, 'Pastiche', p. 195.

contradiction to the orthodox view of the Trinity,⁷⁶ still there were enough examples of a feminine and even an outright maternal Christ for Julian to draw upon, had she wanted to, in formulating her own iteration.

In fact, as far as equating or depicting Jesus as a maternal figure, Julian's illustrious precursors in this mode included Bernard of Clairvaux, who viewed himself as mother of his monk charges in the same way that Christ was mother to his Christian flock; Anselm, who specifically portrays Jesus as a mother, comparing the torments and wounds he suffered in the Passion to the pains and rips of childbirth; and others such as Aelred, William of St. Thierry and Walter Hilton in his translation of James of Milan's *Stimulus Amoris*.⁷⁷ In addition to the late-medieval views on representations of the maternal Jesus, many of which Julian might have been exposed to, strong critical opinions on this motif exist today. These include the position, put forth by Bynum and espoused by many feminist critics, on affective spirituality, particularly the Christocentric type, as having the ability to empower female medieval participants by providing them with a 'feminised' version of God with which to identify, in the form of the embodied Christ, with his pronounced bodily aspects that connected to ideas of femininity, such as his blood representing both food and sustenance (blood equated to milk or breast milk) as well as virginal and menstrual fluid.⁷⁸ These contemporary scholarly takes also incorporate the counter-position proffered by Aers, who posits that the presentation of a feminised Christ, such as the one

⁷⁶ Frances Beer, *Women and Mystical Experience in the Middle Ages* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell, 1992), pp. 7-8.

⁷⁷ Jantzen, *Mystic and Theologian*, p. 117-8. For more on the precursors to this motif, see: Baker, *Vision to Book*, p. 123.

⁷⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 260-1 and 263. For more on this blood as menstrual, see: McAvoy, "And Thou", p. 109.

often portrayed in the Middle Ages and interpreted by these critics in the modern era, actually can be counter-productive to female empowerment, as it prolongs and perpetuates negative stereotypes about womanhood.⁷⁹ Despite the current scholarly debate, the fact remains that the notion of Christ as a mother would most likely have been well known to those of a devotional bent in the late Middle Ages, such as Julian of Norwich.

As with most other facets of the, by this stage, well-established affective devotional tradition, the presentation of Jesus as Mother had accrued some expected and accepted parameters and stock features, all or many of which seemed designed to take advantage of the common medieval view of the feminine as fleshy, weak, vulnerable, yet also nurturing and procreative. These features would have allowed for presenting the abjection entered by the Incarnation—culminating in the ignominious torment and physical death of the Passion—juxtaposed with the triumph enabled by this torment and death, the redemption or rebirth of humankind through the maternal sacrifice of a once-vulnerable, embodied Lord, now resplendently resurrected as the inviolable, transcendent Christ, restored to his rightful place in heaven, as masculine divinity.

Despite the negative stereotypes of femininity upon which such a juxtaposition relied, borne initially from Augustine's dual formulation of the soul 'which denied that the part characterized as female, the lower reason, contained the image of God,'⁸⁰ Robertson, adhering to the particular school of thought originated by Bynum, addresses the feminine aspects of Christ in Julian

⁷⁹ Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', pp. 77-104.

⁸⁰ Baker, *Vision to Book*, p. 108.

of Norwich's texts in an essay⁸¹ in which she reads Jesus' bleeding in the Passion scenes as being evocative of menstrual and virginal blood and Julian's presentation of Jesus as a mother as representing a deliberately employed means of redeeming the sensuality normally associated with the feminine, thus effecting a redemption and even an empowerment of women.⁸²

As mentioned above briefly, Aers famously responded to this type of feminist viewpoint in general and to Robertson's essay in particular with his contrasting overall stance that far from providing a source of power or authority for medieval women, the traditional ideas of femininity often applied to Christ within this strain of worship perpetuated negative or inferior ideas about the feminine, since they relied upon customary perceptions of women as, among other things, weak, vulnerable and carnal, rather than intellectual or high-minded,⁸³ whilst in no way undermining the divinity of Jesus. As part of his argument, Aers asserts that whilst presenting an account of visionary experiences that purports to dovetail neatly with many conventional affective works within the genre, Julian actually subverts the tradition by taking familiar affective tropes and presenting them in a way that effectively strips them of their emotional payloads. Instead she replaces them with the thought-provoking capacity of intellectual ideas, partially in an effort to gain authority and respectability for her accounts of revelatory experience by elevating them from the lower, female-associated realm of affective worship to the higher, male-oriented domain of speculative or intellectual spirituality.

⁸¹ Robertson, 'Medieval Medical', pp. 142-67.

⁸² Robertson, 'Medieval Medical', p. 156.

⁸³ Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', pp. 77-104.

In regards to the specific issue of Julian's presentation of Jesus as Mother, Aers addresses it by offering a contrasting viewpoint to this particular feminist position initially conceived by Bynum and applied, in this specific case, by Robertson. Although he offers a few elements in rebuttal of this perspective, I will focus on just one of Aers' points regarding the maternal Christ, namely his discussion about Julian's presentation of the wound in Christ's side. Aers opines that this gaping hole in Jesus' torso, the outcome of a final insulting thrust from a Roman lance, is yet another well-worn site of late-medieval adoration that, due to its application of contemporary medieval stereotypes of femininity, readily lends itself to adaptation by critics, such as Bynum and Robertson. Some of the feminised ways in which this wound was viewed in the Middle Ages, and is interpreted today by critics, include seeing it as a breast, with the leaking blood being interchangeable with nurturing milk and as a vulva,⁸⁴ a receptive female sexual organ productive of pleasure, but also capable of generating human life, of giving birth to a new chance for fallen humanity.

In the case of Julian's treatment of this representation of Christ's wound—which she first mentions in the tenth revelation (*Revelation*, 24.1-10) and which she returns to in the context of her discussion of Jesus as Mother (*Revelation*, 60.33-36)(a fitting place for such imagery as it is usually presented in maternal terms)—Aers notes that Julian, in describing a scene that calls for fleshly treatment and is usually used by devotional writers to evoke an

⁸⁴ Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 92. For more on the breast and genitalia aspects respectively, see also: Karma Lochrie, 'Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies', in *Constructing Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Karma Lochrie, Peggy McCracken and James A. Schultz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1997), pp. 180-200, (pp. 189-90); Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 58; and Wolfgang Riehle, *The Middle English Mystics*, trans. B. Standring (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 46.

emotional, 'feminine' response, actually turns convention on its head by segueing from a rather terse entry into the wound into an intellectual understanding, rather than the expected affective connection. So, when Julian is brought into the wound by Christ, she does not find a breast from which to suck nurturing blood or milk, nor does she encounter the sexualised opening to a fertile womb, from which humanity can be reborn. Instead, she achieves an intellectual awareness which she portrays as an understanding of 'the blessed godhede... that is to mene, the endlesse love that was without beginning, and is, and shal be ever' (*Revelation*, 24.8-10).

Of this somewhat unique movement from the accustomed affective treatment of Christ's wound into intellectual speculation, Aers states, 'the language here is generalizing, abstract, and sets aside the conventional fleshy image from which it began.'⁸⁵ He interprets this substitution of the expected outcome or presentation with an intellectual or unitive viewpoint as further support for his contention that Julian was, in part, purposely replacing the conventions of female, affective writing with those of the male, speculative strain, in service to an ongoing specific strategy designed to cast herself 'in the role of theologian, exegete, and teacher.'⁸⁶ Yet, from a Lacanian reading, perhaps one of the reasons that Julian's depiction of her entry into Jesus' side moves from a conventionally feminised, emotional and bodily treatment to a more 'masculine' intellectual or unitive viewpoint is due to the simple fact that this is where her desire leads her.

⁸⁵ Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 93.

⁸⁶ Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 100.

Therefore, viewed in the light of a relentless search for the desired quantity, Julian sets off after the traditional image of the affectively wrought Jesus as mother—which can be read in Lacanian terms as the *petit objet a* or partial object—yet, as soon as she draws near to this supposedly desired Thing, as she, in fact, enters an opening in its sacred body, Julian discovers that the physical object that she thought had contained the essence of God itself, actually is only a vessel acting as a portal to something else. In this instance the object in question, the material, physical body of her beloved, and specifically the wound in his side, which offers access into the desired being itself, leads Julian to a vision of ‘the godhed and the joyes of heven, with gostely sekernesse of endlesse blisse’ (*Revelation*, 60.35-6). Thus, the seemingly tangible representation of her desired object, Christ, when approached so close as even to admit entry into its boundaries, suddenly morphs into something so removed from physicality that she can only describe it in the unitive terms of an intimation of eternal love and unending ecstasy.

In addition, there might be yet another way to shed light on Julian’s Jesus as Mother by looking at her presentation of this motif through a Lacanian prism. This would involve eschewing the tendency primarily to view Julian’s unusual, non-physical interpretation of the wound in Jesus’ side as being somehow more male, because of the association in medieval times of intellectual and unitive spirituality with the masculine. Instead one could look at this less bodily, more ineffable treatment as being possibly feminine, when seen through the illumination of a certain Lacanian perspective. Specifically, Lacan speculates that women—because they occupy a space outside of the language-based power structure constructed around and geared towards

attaining the plenitude offered by the Transcendental Signifier, which Lacan designates as the phallus⁸⁷ (which although he doesn't specifically gender it as male, still in effect tends to exclude the female)—essentially fit within the gap of no-thing or nothing beyond the Symbolic and Imaginary orders. For this reason, he views the female sexual organ, and by extrapolation, the feminine principle, as 'the form of an opening and an emptiness.'⁸⁸ Certainly this could seem to suggest that, in a Lacanian model, the feminine is denied value and power and, indeed, this is exactly the objection that many feminists have to Lacan's thought.⁸⁹ However this aspect of the feminine, when taken to a logical conclusion within a Lacanian framework, using the terms he himself delineated, can also arrive at another conclusion, especially when considered from a mystical standpoint.

Thus, although the female stands firmly outside of the walls of the Symbolic and Imaginary registers, which are defined and regulated through a resolutely male value system of chains of signifiers based upon the ultimate, phallic signifier—when defined as the emptiness which lies beyond the borders of signification, the feminine can actually be associated with the register of the Real, a place of void beyond language that serves in Lacan's formulation as the origin of desire and the seat of all that is desired. Furthermore, having already established that the Real is the home of the Thing, which to Lacan represents the true essence of all that is relentlessly desired, and since Lacan defines this Thing in terms of emptiness or a void, an entity or destination that does not

⁸⁷ For more on this, see: Tina Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 26.

⁸⁸ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 169.

⁸⁹ For more on this, see: Grosz, *Lacan*, pp. 174-80.

exist within the bounds of language, but that can be momentarily experienced (if never described) in flashes of *jouissance*,⁹⁰ then the feminine could also be equated with the Thing itself. Lacan himself seems explicitly to gesture at such a connotation when he states of the feminine that it is ‘situated as absolute object in the beyond of the pleasure principle,’⁹¹ or in other words the absolute desired Thing within the register of the transgressive Real. Brennan gives support to this conclusion when she states of Lacan’s formulations on the feminine vis à vis the Thing, ‘The symbolic once supported what was made into God, but it now supports what is made into woman. It seems the woman comes to represent, “in the phallogentric dialectic, the absolute Other”.’⁹² Thus, Lacan’s own theory seems to project the female into the role of a divine Other or Thing, in which he himself might not ultimately believe, but which is a powerful position nonetheless.

If one accepts the possibility that the Lacanian formulation of the Thing can be interpreted as feminine, then essentially, when seen through this prism, Julian’s version of Jesus as Mother, with all of the endless bliss, love and power that she ascribes to this partially feminine figure, opens the door to a possible additional interpretation of the portrayed femininity, one she hints at when she states of her concept of ‘moderhed in werking,’ ‘therin is a forthspreding by the same grace, of length and brede, of high and of depnesse without ende’ (*Revelation*, 59.39-40). Julian’s maternal Christ—and the picture of femininity to which it alludes—therefore points at something quite distinct from the

⁹⁰ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 202.

⁹¹ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 214.

⁹² Brennan, *History After Lacan*, pp. 66-7. Here Brennan quotes from Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 94.

vulnerable, pierced bodily image of the usual affective version of the Jesus as Mother embraced by the feminist perspective of Bynum, Robertson and others or the intellectualised, male understanding of Julian's treatment of this motif, as espoused by Aers. Instead, Julian's representation of this maternal motif could be viewed as one which incorporates traditionally 'male' and 'female' elements to create 'an androgynous deity [that] provides both an index to the stereotypes associated with each gender in Christianity and a paradigm for transcending the theology of sexual difference.'⁹³ This androgynous maternal Christ also, in a plausible stretch of Lacanian logic, could point to a view of femininity equated with the sought Thing, that which resides within the emptiness or gap of the register of the Real, representing all that is desired. To Lacan this might inevitably equal nothingness, but from Julian's viewpoint, the desired Thing is nothing other than divinity itself, a quantity which sometimes manifests, in her metonymy of longing, as a vast, formless space of immense power, such as that contained within the wound in Jesus as Mother's side, an infinite void within which the plenitude of the entire godhead dwells, ready to enfold all of humankind.

Julian's Unusual Deployment of Different Forms of Mystical Language

The second area of originality, inspired by Julian's pursuit of a desire directed towards what can be seen in terms of the Lacanian Thing, within her texts that I wish to concentrate upon in this chapter concerns her utilisation of language. Specifically, unlike many devotional writers of her day whose use of language primarily aligned them with one spiritual mode of seeking or another, such as

⁹³ Baker, *Vision to Book*, p. 108.

the positive, cataphatic mode of expression associated with affective worship or the more abstract, and at times apophatic, communication linked to the intellectual and unitive modes, Julian, in keeping with her pragmatic application of the three main modes of seeking, in deference to her mainly longing-propelled search, deploys both the languages of saying and unsaying. Beckwith offers some insight on the employment of different types of mystical language and where Julian's texts are positioned within these categories when she states:

The negative mode is usually represented by *The Cloud of Unknowing*... and in the writings of the fourteenth-century Dominican German mystics—Eckhart, Tauler and Suso. The writings of the positive mystical way are usually represented by Richard Rolle and Margery Kempe. There are several writers who fit uneasily into either of these categories, most obviously Walter Hilton and Julian of Norwich.⁹⁴

In addition, I will attempt to offer evidence that Julian also occasionally appears to employ a hybridized mode of discourse that mingles both the apophatic and the cataphatic in an effort to put into concrete terms a depiction of the desired Thing that lies well beyond the limits of language.

As discussed earlier in the section on Julian's non-linear implementation of all three modes of medieval mystical seeking, when writing about affective worship authors usually employ concrete, image-based language and when dealing with the more esoteric ideas found in the intellectual and unitive strains, writers customarily utilise a more speculative type of communication, one that, in its most developed form, often resorts to denying the very

⁹⁴ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, p. 127.

possibility of describing God with words. Turner defines these two contrasting approaches in medieval spiritual communication in the following way:

"apophaticism" asserts ... the breakdown of *speech*, which in the face of the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark... [and] the cataphatic is, we might say, the verbose element in theology, it is the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God.⁹⁵

As established earlier, Julian clearly deploys cataphatic language in her descriptions of the Passion scenes she witnesses. For instance, she famously describes the flowing blood she perceives in terms of raindrops, pellets and fish scales (*Revelation*, 7.21-2). She also offers minute, highly disturbing and visceral details about the drying out of Jesus' flesh and the resultant changes in the colour of his skin:

I saw the swete face as it were drye and blodeles with pale
dying; and sithen more deade pale, languring; and than turned
more deade into blew; and sithen more browne blew, as the
flesh turned more depe dede. For his passion shewde to me
most properly in his blessed face, and namely in his lippes,
there I saw these four colours—tho that were before fresh and
rody, lively and liking to my sight. This was a swemfulle
change, to se this depe dying. And also the nose clongen
togeder and dried, to my sight, and the swete body waxid

⁹⁵ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 20.

browne and blacke, alle changed and turned oute of the fair,
fresh, and lively coloure of himselfe into drye dying
(*Revelation*, 16.1-9).

This description of the changes that Julian witnesses in the colour and elasticity of Christ's face involves an exhaustively intricate and explicit focus on the process and consequences of death overtaking a human body. The words and phrases that Julian uses to portray the physical evidence of the gradual and 'swemfulle' or terrible draining out of Jesus' life are characteristically extremely tactile, sensually evocative and graphic. When Julian writes of the deathly blue and then dull blue colour that Christ's lips are assuming, as he draws closer and closer to death, she paints such a vivid picture of Jesus' physical descent into extinction, that one can almost see the shocking details of a death in progress. The language Julian uses here, and in other instances when she portrays her perceptions of Christ's Passion, is clearly cataphatic, meant to offer concrete facts about a corporeal and tangible incarnation of God.

Julian also deploys examples of a language of unsaying which is the polar opposite to cataphatic expression. Fewer examples of this type of communication exist within her works, yet one does clearly see signs of this apophatic approach which, according to Beckwith, is 'categorized by its attempt to dispense with analogy, symbol, or other forms of mediation,'⁹⁶ in her texts. One example of Julian's deployment of apophatic utterance occurs after God has revealed the profundity of his nature, telling her that he is all that exists in the universe in a series of pronouncements that begin with "'I it am'" (*Revelation*, 26.4-8). At this point, Julian signals her inability to convey the vastness and

⁹⁶ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, p. 14.

magnificence of what has been revealed to her, declaring, 'the joy that I saw in the shewing... passeth alle that hart can think or soule may desire' (*Revelation*, 26.10-11). Another instance of apophatic speech in her texts can be found when Julian elucidates on the concept of 'gostely sight,' one of the three methods, along with 'bodily sight' and 'worde formede in [her] understanding,' that forms her tripartite means of receiving the information conveyed to her by and about God in her visions, saying 'I can not ne may not shew it as openly ne as fully as I would' (*Revelation*, 9.25-6). That critics believe that Julian's writings offered examples of both the cataphatic and apophatic can be evidenced by Turner's statement that, 'for all the affirmative richness of [Julian's] theological vocabulary, hers is a linguistic strategy every bit as apophatic as that of the *Cloud* author or Meister Eckhart.'⁹⁷

Aside from her interspersed implementation of apophatic and cataphatic expression within her texts, what makes Julian's use of language original, though not utterly unique, can be found in the instances where she apparently fuses elements of both saying and unsaying, possibly in an attempt to try and describe the aspects of her desired Lord which transcend the abilities of language to convey. At these junctures in her accounts, she sometimes deploys language that simultaneously incorporates positive elements, to attempt to describe those elements that can be depicted (in Lacanian terms, the part objects that contain the indescribable, sought Thing) and, at the same time, negative features, in order to gesture at the wordlessness of the essence of the desired God (who, in Lacanian parlance, takes the form or formlessness of the emptiness hiding within the sought concrete forms).

⁹⁷ Turner, *Julian*, p. 24.

One example of this type of communication occurs in Julian's presentation of the curious substance, which she starts off by describing as 'a little thing the quantity of an haselnot, lying in the palme of my hand as me semide, and it was as rounde as any balle' (*Revelation*, 5.7-8). Up to this point the object in question, though admittedly odd and not yet fully defined—since we do not actually know what it is, but only what it simulates in size and shape—still appears to be largely obeying the laws of matter allowing it to be somewhat captured within the strictures of concrete, cataphatic language.

However, this initial impression soon gives way as Julian proceeds to decipher and delineate what this object actually represents, or in Lacanian terminology, as she tries to unpack the Thing within the form, leading her to inform her readers that this hazelnut-like material is, according to God's explanation to her, "'all that is made'" (*Revelation*, 5.10). Furthermore, Julian expands her description of this now-esoteric matter to include the details that 'it might sodenly have fallen to nought for littlenes' save for the fact that, as God assures her through the medium of a disembodied inner voice, "'It lasteth and ever shall for God loveth it'" (*Revelation*, 5.11-12). At this juncture, as Miles expresses it, 'space is formed and then turned inside-out, because, ultimately, space becomes ineffective as a tool for expressing the mystical relations of self to God within the vision: it is not measurable closeness, but one-ness; not physical enclosure together, but inexpressible unity.'⁹⁸ Thus, after apparently beginning her depiction of this quantity in the reassuring words of positive language which enable her to assign it the general qualities of physical shape and size, Julian soon introduces language of a more abstract and non-

⁹⁸ Miles, 'Space and Enclosure', p. 157.

representational character in order to try and hint at what she sees beyond the surface of this mystifying object. In this way she moves from outlining a substance that can be apprehended through the senses, a requirement of cataphatic language, to writing about something or Thing that is at once so tiny, unsubstantial and unstable in terms of its materiality that it threatens to break apart into nothingness and yet which, at the same time, contains the entirety of Creation within its ephemeral bounds.

What distinguishes Julian's writing here from the purely apophatic utterances of unsaying, once she enters territory that apparently cannot be conveyed in the forms of cataphatic communication that she has available to her, is her utter refusal to give up on trying to explain what she is perceiving in some sort of positive way. Rather than expanding into negation, such as stating that a description of the hazelnut-like substance exceeds her authorial ability or language's capability, Julian uses the language she has at her disposal to try and say the unsayable. This she does by segueing from her initial portrayal of the hazelnut-like object's appearance, mediated by her senses, to an attempt at explaining its subsequent effects upon her emotionally and mentally, once it has revealed itself to be ineffable, or at least beyond the bounds of language.

Many critics view the hazelnut-like image within the larger framework of Julian's metaphors of enclosure. This refers to Julian's repeated use of a certain type of metaphor which initially presents the reader with a seemingly tangible, familiar and bordered object, such as a hazelnut or a bleeding wound, before abruptly, and without warning, expanding its shape, boundaries and, even somehow, its meaning. These heretofore concrete, bounded objects or areas suddenly open up into virtually limitless spaces that now point to the

vastness and the ineffability of the divine—a concept so infinite that it can scarcely be hinted at, much less described, in terms understandable to the human mind. Miles sums up this use of metaphor in Julian’s works, when she writes, ‘In Julian’s texts, visionary spaces of enclosed intimacy with the divine—the life-sized hazelnut, the wound, the interior of the soul—simultaneously exist as spaces of immense “world space,” embracing all mankind, all her “evencristen” with herself and the divine.’⁹⁹ Thus, Julian manages to use language in such a fashion that its positive aspects describe the concrete, the physical, the familiar, whilst its negative elements bring about a seamless, if disruptive, transition into discussing the vast emptiness or indescribable divinity (embodied by the Lacanian Thing that sits outside the limits of the chain of signifiers) contained and revealed, if fleetingly, within seemingly tangible objects or experiences.

An Unending Process of Desire

Having examined the many ways in which Julian of Norwich’s texts reflect her desire for the Lacanian Thing, I would now like to conclude by addressing an inescapable consequence of such a desire, one that Julian herself acknowledges frequently and even alludes to in the very last chapter of her book—the fact that this type of longing will never, ever be satisfied.

Because Lacan’s formulation of desire relies on the circumstance that what is desired, the Thing, jumps from partial object to partial object, necessarily this type of desire ‘always demands something else... it insists on

⁹⁹ Miles, ‘Space and Enclosure’, p. 159.

something else... beyond whatever it is able to formulate.’¹⁰⁰ So, according to Lacan, in this whole metonymy of desire, ‘what cannot be attained is precisely the Thing—i.e., it’s not an object.’¹⁰¹ For this reason, Julian’s search for God, if seen in the light of a quest predicated on desire for the Thing, can never fully result in success, at least not when success is defined by absolute apprehension of the sought divinity in all its complexity and plenitude.

Julian herself points to such a conclusion when she talks about the ongoing and relentless character of her longing for God, saying:

For I saw him and sought him. For we be now so blinde and so unwise that we can never seke God till what time that he of his goodnes sheweth him to us. And whan we see ought of him graciously, then are we stered by the same grace to seke with great desire to see him more blissefully. And thus I saw him and sought him, and I had him and wanted him. And this is and should be our comen working in this life, as to my sight (*Revelation*, 10.10-15).

Therefore, to Julian, it is very obvious that no matter what apprehension of her divine beloved she manages to arrive at—whether it be in partial physical sights and intellectual understandings or in all-encompassing flashes of unitive *jouissance* that encapsulate both feeling and understanding—there will still always be more to discover and more to desire.

Turner expresses this characteristic of Julian’s search, when he says, ‘For her, the emphasis is relentlessly placed on the incompleteness of the

¹⁰⁰ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 294.

¹⁰¹ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 158.

contemplative vision. If she sees one thing, this leads only to her not seeing another, and so to more seeking.¹⁰² Of course, Christianity, in contrast to Lacan, believes that final satisfaction will be attained. It is just deferred until after death at which time the seeker will find all her answers, all the peace and love she has sought for so long, in heaven with God, where she will finally be privy to the beatific vision that will explain all—even Julian's inability to see sin.

Whether one adheres to Lacan's assessment that fulfilment will always be denied or to the Christian faith's contention that it will be deferred, the fact remains that, after all of her seeking, yearning and struggling to understand and capture the essence of the God she so desires, Julian is forced to admit, at the very end of her account that, as far as the attainment of the ultimate goal of her search, 'it is not yet performed, as to my sight' (*Revelation*, 86.1-2). Yet despite the failure, by the completion of her books, to have completely apprehended the desired Thing, her coveted Lord, Julian nevertheless appears to have grown immeasurably closer to a fuller realisation of her sought divinity. When she states, in the last few lines of her book: 'I lerned that love is oure lordes mening. And I saw fulle sekerly in this and in alle, that or God made us he loved us, which love was never sleked, ne never shalle' (*Revelation*, 86.16-18), she is making it clear that, in the end, her visions have all been about nothing but love (another word for desire?). It is this love or desire which apparently has drawn God to create humankind, a quantity he loved before he even brought it into being. Characteristically, for Julian's texts, God's love for humanity—the same love (or desire or devotion) which has, in turn, reciprocally, driven her to seek

¹⁰² Turner, *Julian*, p. 147.

God—is so boundless that it has never been satisfied and, in fact, is eternally insatiable.

Julian's ultimate comprehension about the ever-shifting goal of her desire is one that has reduced (or expanded) every physical manifestation, intellectual understanding or ineffable intimation of the desired into a decoction of love. Such a conception or experience of God, or the desired Thing—one that has begun to merge the categories of intellectual understanding and emotional feeling into a polysemic fusion of seeing, knowing and loving—suggests that her desire, if it has not yet attained utter fulfilment, seems well on its way to approaching something resembling, as far as is ever going to be possible, close enough.

Chapter Two: Anamorphosis, Authorial Perspective and Subject as Object

Julian of Norwich's texts, as discussed in the previous chapter, relate the story of a spiritual search based upon intense, self-proclaimed longing for God. This mystical pursuit, although it was conducted in the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries, can benefit from being seen in terms of Lacan's formulation of desire for the Thing. Having already explored the overarching role which desire plays in the experiences and apprehensions that Julian describes in her works, I would like now to dig a little deeper into certain aspects of her texts, which, though they stem from desire for the Thing, can also be viewed in light of other Lacanian concepts, which all trace back to and stem from Lacan's formulation on human desire. Specifically, I intend to take a look at the use of authorial perspectives in Julian's texts, in the light of Lacan's concept of anamorphosis. I also will explore her concept that God can ultimately be found within the human soul in relation to Lacan's notion of subject as object.

To begin with I would like to examine Julian's employment of several different authorial perspectives, or ways of talking about her desired God, which correspond to the three accepted medieval modes of spiritual aspiration—affective, intellectual and unitive—already discussed in the preceding chapter. I contend that Julian deploys these three authorial positions as a direct result of her relentless desire for the quantity she so covets, her beloved God or, in Lacanian parlance, the Thing which appears to reside within an object or objects (more specifically referred to as *objet petit a*), but which can never be apprehended within any particular object.

Before I embark upon this examination, I would first like to clarify exactly what it is that I mean when I refer to Julian's use of authorial or subject positions in the context of this discussion. Although I agree with Sutherland's statement that, 'any experience (whether real or imaginary) becomes, as soon as it is uttered or committed to the page, to some extent a fiction in that its authenticity can never be objectively gauged,'¹ I would like to take Julian at her word, for the purposes of this thesis, that the experiences and the fruits of contemplation borne from these experiences are, at least to the narrator of these events and understandings, genuine. As Watson declares, 'the psychological events which lie behind any work of literature are ineffable, inasmuch as they must be expressed in the formal medium of language and can never be recovered by readers... we can do no more than to indicate the ways in which experience is formalized and deflected by language.'² In this case, I intend to look at the ways in which Julian employed and wielded various conventional manners of writing about the spiritual experiences that she claimed to have had, in order best to pursue and convey her longing-induced experiences and apprehensions of divinity. I will follow this course rather than exploring any potential tactics or strategies that Julian, as the self-aware author, might have been deploying in order to gain greater authority or prestige for her works or herself.

¹ Sutherland, "'Oure Feyth'", p. 7. For more on the impossibility of ever accurately being able to identify the author's true identity, much less her or his intention, see: Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1987), p. 142.

² Nicholas Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 2.

It is not that I disagree that Julian, as a female writer, would have had to be cognizant of the restrictions placed upon those of her gender who attempted to write about spiritual matters. Clearly, in an age in which, as Beckwith states, 'women could not speak as themselves, but only as visionaries (the instruments or medium of God's voice), and even then only with great difficulty, for they always had to convince the male ecclesiastical authorities of the validity of their special relationship to God,'³ it is hard to dispute that Julian would have had to somehow adopt the tone or style or semblance of a female visionary author in order for her texts to be circulated at all.

Additionally, I have no particular disagreement with those critics who claim that Julian the author was a 'subtle strategist,'⁴ one who employed 'deliberate literary artifice'⁵ in order to gain greater acceptance for her works, as well as the necessary cover for her 'strongly original and, in some cases, destabilizing, insights into systems of theological or communal ordering.'⁶ However, for the purposes of the argument I am trying to present, it is more helpful to view the different subject positions that Julian offers throughout her texts as being, first and foremost, the most effective means that she, as the narrator in the guise of seeker, can find to represent her self-proclaimed experiences and understandings, rather than seeing them primarily as self-consciously wielded tools used to bolster or protect her works or their author.

³ Sarah Beckwith, 'A Very Material Mysticism: The Medieval Mysticism of Margery Kempe', in *Medieval Literature: Criticism, Ideology and History*, ed. David Aers (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986), pp. 34-57, (p. 49).

⁴ Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 81.

⁵ Sutherland, "'Oure Feyth'", p. 7. Many other critics have offered their own takes on Julian's authorial strategising, including: Staley, 'Crisis of Authority', p. 161 and McAvoy, *Authority*, p. 12.

⁶ Staley, *Dissenting Fictions*, p. 3.

As Mills says in regards to the function of the vision in a medieval work about women navigating a spiritual minefield, but which can be applied perfectly to Julian's visionary experiences and her attempts to capture them in writing, 'Vision is a hermeneutic that permits both power and resistance, registering a conflict of positions and discourses... Identifications of various kinds are produced in the course of this process, since the multiplication of looking corresponds to a multiplication of subject positions.'⁷ It is precisely these multiple viewpoints, borne from the complex ways of seeing that Julian's longing-filled search for God or the Thing engenders, that I would like to address in this section and that I refer to as authorial perspectives or subject positions.

The Employment of Different Authorial Voices in Julian's Texts

The desire-filled search that Julian's texts portray can be seen, as discussed in the last chapter, in regards to a desire for that quantity which Lacan deems the Thing, which may appear to manifest within objects, but which actually can be viewed, as Žižek phrases it, in terms of 'objectless ecstasy'. This Thing, Žižek elaborates, this '*jouissance* is "undecidable", "free-floating". The enthusiasm of fans for their favourite rock star and the religious trance of a devout Catholic in the presence of the Pope are libidinally *the same phenomenon*; they differ only in the different symbolic network which supports them."⁸ Thus, in a Lacanian

⁷ Robert Mills, 'Seeing Face to Face: Troubled Looks in the Katherine Group', in *Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality, and Sight in Medieval Text and Image*, ed. Emma Campbell and Robert Mills (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 117-36 (p. 125).

⁸ Žižek, *Plague*, p. 62.

framework, as laid out here by Žižek, the desired quantity, the Thing or *jouissance* or the transgressive entry into the Real—which in my contention also represents the God that Julian of Norwich’s texts claim to seek—assumes no immutable form and takes on no tangible value, but simply appears within whatever object to hand is most suited to a seeker’s or a subject’s cultural or personal proclivities. Certainly in Julian’s works, evidence of which was offered earlier, she describes a constantly revolving multitude of versions of her sought beloved.

At this juncture I would like to explore what effect these varied versions of divinity have on the incidence of different authorial perspectives within Julian’s texts. Specifically I would like to posit that, in order best to portray her longing and search for a quantity that keeps mutating and morphing in appearance and meaning, Julian seems to have developed and deployed a strategy to capture and convey these varied guises of the divine in a way that would be understandable and acceptable to a late-medieval audience, through the utilisation of the styles of writing and authorial voices most connected to the respective modes which best describe and explicate the varying forms of God which her search reveals to her. Therefore, in order to depict the suffering, embodied Christ of affective piety, Julian adopts the perspective and conventions of the devotional writer; in order to convey the more speculative contours of a God of ideas and concepts, she employs the intellectual voice of the exegete; and in order to portray or intimate the utterly abstract and virtually formless guise of a deity that cannot be captured easily in words, she utilises the techniques of the apophatic worshipper.

Julian herself appears implicitly to declare the need for such a rhetorical and hermeneutical strategy within her books when she states, in regards to her visions and the revelations they engendered, that 'All this was shewde by thre partes: that is to sey, by bodily sight, and by worde formede in my understanding, and by gostely sight' (*Revelation*, 9.24-5). Thus if, as she claims, her apprehensions of the sought divine have been revealed to her through physical or bodily means, intellectual understandings and spiritual intimations, it stands to reason that, due to the strict conventions of the late-medieval period governing the manners of discourse relating to each of these different versions of divinity,⁹ Julian would need to adjust the way in which she described each one in order to ensure that she best capture and convey each version of her sought Lord. Indeed Julian's texts do show evidence of different perspectives in relation to the various forms of the beloved that she describes. Gillespie remarks of this phenomenon, 'It is essential to her strategy of truth-telling that she is able to float above the discourses that predominated in her contemporary textual environment, promiscuously bathing herself in them, but never being possessed or controlled by them.'¹⁰ Furthermore, he concludes that Julian displays a 'virtuoso command of the full range of contemporary didactic and devotional vernacular writing... [a] skilful use of different linguistic codes

⁹ For more on the three modes and the voices and authorial personalities that accompanied them, see, for instance: Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, pp. 53 on the affective tradition; Turner, *Julian*, pp. 5-7 on the intellectual mode; and Oliver Davies, *God Within: The Mystical Tradition of Northern Europe* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1988), p. 4 and Turner, *Darkness*, p. 20 on the unitive approach and the apophatic voice.

¹⁰ Gillespie, 'Pastiche', p. 195.

and registers, narrative voices and rhetorical levels of style.’¹¹ All of this simply underlines the fact that, in her writings, Julian demonstrates a willingness to deploy an array of different authorial styles and perspectives, which I contend could reflect a need effectively to communicate the details about and essence of her search for a desired God who keeps metonymically changing in appearance and meaning.

It might be helpful at this point to take a more detailed look at the different authorial voices which Julian displays throughout her texts. These points-of-view can be equated to the three traditional modes of spiritual seeking, discussed in chapter one, which represented the main accepted means of approaching the divine in the late Middle Ages: the affective, intellectual and unitive strains. I have already offered evidence, in the previous chapter, that these three modes do indeed occur throughout Julian’s accounts and that they manifest in a non-linear, dialectic and recursive manner, which reflects whatever particular vision or apprehension of the sought God or Thing with which her desire happens to present her at any given juncture. I would currently like to address Julian’s utilisation of the authorial perspectives associated with these three spiritual modes. As such, I intend to offer examples of the incidence of these various authorial points-of-view within Julian’s works.

I will begin by examining Julian’s employment of the tone, language and subject matter usually associated with mystical writing about affective piety. But first I will briefly sketch out the general guidelines that most critics agree

¹¹ Vincent Gillespie, ‘Vernacular Theology’, in *Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature: Middle English*, ed. Paul Strohm (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 401-20, (p. 403).

characterise the conventions associated with this type of writing. In a very broad sense, as Watson explains, this was 'a late-medieval tradition of writing about passionate love for God... [a] literary mode which almost from the start had tended to be more celebratory than analytic.'¹² This type of writing, which describes the practice of focusing meditatively upon and engaging in imitation of Christ's suffering and bleeding body on the cross, 'uses analogy and symbolism surrounding the humanity of God'¹³ to convey the mystical writer's approach to a closer experience or apprehension of Jesus.

Due to its bodily focus affective mysticism tended to be associated with and attract females, who were considered, during this era, to be more suited for fleshly pursuits and emotional outbursts, than for intellectual concerns, a point discussed in the previous chapter. As a contemporary text, Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, makes clear, affective worship was meant for those of a simpler frame of mind, since it was:

steryng specialy to þe love of Jesu ande also for þe pleyn
sentence to comun vndirstondyng [s]emeþ amonges opere
sovereynly edifying to symple creatures þe whiche as childryn
haven nede to be fedde with mylke of ly3te doctryne & not
with sadde mete of grete clargye & of h[ye] contemplacion.¹⁴

Therefore affective piety, and the texts which depicted and encouraged this form of devotion, were deemed more appropriate for those who were like children, a category that certainly included women.¹⁵ Not surprisingly, many of

¹² Watson, *Rolle*, p. 21.

¹³ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, p. 15.

¹⁴ Sargent, *Mirror*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Sargent, *Mirror*, p. x.

the writers of this sort of pietistic literature were in fact female. As Bynum asserts, 'Women's writing was, in general, more affective... [as] certain devotional emphases, particularly devotion to Christ's suffering humanity and to the eucharist... were characteristic of women's practices and women's words.'¹⁶ So, to recap, affective writing normally focused on some aspect of Christ's Passion, usually involving a form of emotional imitation of his suffering. As such its tone tended to be quite personal, intimate and emotive. Finally, it was a type of writing (indeed perhaps the only one within the late-medieval spiritual sphere) in which women's contributions were accepted.

Because the spiritual journey Julian's texts portray ostensibly falls under the category of visionary experience, it would not be surprising to find evidence of a narrative voice traditionally associated with the devotional genre. During the late-fourteenth and early fifteenth-centuries, the literary voice conventionally employed to discuss affective piety typically would have been expected to display characteristics, which included a strong emotional connection to the embodied object of worship, the crucified Christ suffering through the throes of his Passion, and a fervent devotion to Jesus or his mother, which often involved imitation or identification, as well as erotic overtones.¹⁷ Since one of the intentions behind this form of worship, as Beckwith explains, was to mould 'the body of Christ into the medium for producing devotees

¹⁶ Bynum, *Holy Feast*, P. 26. For more on women's pursuits and the role to which they were limited in medieval society leading them towards writing about affective piety, see: Lochrie, *Translations*, p. 2; Staley, *Dissenting*, p. 5; and Oliver Davies, 'Later Medieval Mystics' in *The Medieval Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Medieval Period*, ed. G.R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 221-32 (pp. 228-9).

¹⁷ McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, p. 32

whose desire, love and affect can be the vehicles of transformation,¹⁸ its written accounts often offered words and a tone designed to mirror and evoke such transformative emotions. Additionally, due to the fact that this type of piety involved the personal, one-on-one interaction with or connection to the tangible Jesus, these works often were written in the first-person and detailed stories of intense, physical and affective encounters with an embodied deity, all offered from the relatively humble vantage point of a seeker, pilgrim or devotee, rather than that of a learned theologian or a speculative scholar.

Examples of such an affective tone and voice do occur in Julian's texts, primarily in the many interspersed episodes within the first third of these accounts which describe Julian personally experiencing scenes from Christ's Passion. Julian depicts these showings or visions in visceral detail with Technicolor images of her beloved saviour nailed up on a cross, bleeding, sweating, suffering and apparently heading towards certain death. The authorial voice that Julian often uses to narrate these events bears a great resemblance, although it does not constitute an exact match to,¹⁹ the conventional affective writing style of the day, an example of which would be Richard Rolle's extremely personal and emotional description of Christ on the cross, addressed directly to him in the form of a lover's entreaty. Rolle writes, 'Ihesu, of loue I se tokenynge, þi armes spred to loue clippyng, Thi hede bowed

¹⁸ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, p. 70.

¹⁹ See Aers' discussion about the way in which Julian's seemingly affective style actually manages to subvert the genre in the end, due to the introduction of intellectual motifs and commentary and a detached tone alongside seemingly emotion-based descriptions of typically devotional scenes and subject matter: 'Humanity of Christ', p. 87-95.

to swet kyssynge, bi side al open to loue showynge.’²⁰ Christ’s torments are described, as would have been customary for such a genre, from the perspective of one watching them unfold from a close and present vantage point.²¹ Rather than relating a series of events from the detached perspective of a third-person narrator, for instance, the writer of an affective spiritual account would have been expected to participate in the Passion scenes at times, to offer signs of emotional response and even physical engagement from the more engaged vantage point of a first-person perspective. The conventions of this genre required passionate involvement on the part of the affective narrator because, in order for the aim of this form of worship to be attained, in order to evoke an emotional, tangible devotional connection to the embodied Lord, one had to enter the action, so to speak. Affective meditations and the writings which helped to guide them would have relied upon a style of exposition and a point-of-view that allowed one to participate emotionally in Christ’s Passion.²² Thus, as Anne Savage explains of a typical affective work: ‘In the imagined presence of the lover, the [seeker] approaches his wooing and suffering through sensualised reading which underlines a physical conception of affect, rather than a rational abstraction.’²³ Evidence that Julian offers such a sensual

²⁰ S.J. Ogilvie-Thomson, ed., *Richard Rolle: Prose and Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 56. Another example of this sort of affective style of writing can be found in Rolle’s very typical, poignant and highly emotional description of Christ’s suffering in H.E. Allen, ed., *English Writings of Richard Rolle* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), p. 21.

²¹ Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, p. 61.

²² McNamer, *Affective Meditation*, p. 3.

²³ Anne Savage, ‘The Wooing Group: Pain, Pleasure and the Anchoritic Body’, in *The Milieu and Context of the Wooing Group*, ed. Susannah Mary Chewning (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 165-177, (p.166).

depiction of and approach to the embodied form of her desired divinity, her sought Thing, can be witnessed throughout the pages of her works.

With words that—in the tradition of the affective worshipper and commentator—convey great emotional impact, Julian often portrays elements of Jesus' Passion from the point-of-view of an engaged, suffering eye-witness forced to watch the unbearable demise of a lover. One example of such an "eye-witness" account occurs in chapter seventeen of *Revelation*, when Julian describes, in great detail, the wounds on Christ's hands and feet. She says: 'For tenderness of the swete handes and the swete feet, by the gretenes, hardhede, and grevousede of the nailes, the woundes waxid wide' (*Revelation*, 17.7-8). With great precision, Julian here depicts the logical repercussions of having hard nails driven through the hands and feet of a mortal, physical body. As if she were standing so close to the crucifix that she could somehow have a close-up view of the damage wrought by the sharp objects that have been hammered cruelly through Jesus' tender skin and his bones, Julian explains how the wounds have opened wide as a result of the size, terribleness and hardness of the nails. In this instance, Julian is not merely repeating a story she has heard or read, she is instead recounting her vivid, palpable memory of a scene she has personally witnessed and indeed actively participated in.

Thus, in this case, as well as in written depictions of this sort, which appear intermittently throughout her texts, but which begin to diminish in frequency towards the latter two thirds of *Revelation*, Julian presents an authorial perspective which fits very well with the identity of the affective seeker. For instance, like Rolle's example above (though with less overt emotion and without the erotic overtones), Julian displays the typical

positioning and language of an affective seeker when she places herself directly in the middle of the Passion scene, which she describes from a first-person perspective. She states:

I saw with bodely sight in the face of the crucifixe that hung
before me, in the which I beheld continually a parte of his
passion: dispite, spitting, solewing, and buffeting, and many
languring paines, mo than I can tell (*Revelation*, 10.1-3).

Here, Julian makes it very clear that she is physically present at the site of Christ's crucifixion. She says that she sees with 'bodely sight', with her own corporeal eyes, the indignities and torments that Jesus was forced to suffer during his Passion—the contempt, spitting and buffeting to which he was being subjected. The cataphatic language that Julian employs in this passage—in order to convey the very concrete, tangible experiences that she is describing—very much fits within the expected and accepted mode of late-medieval affective descriptions of Christ's Passion.

In addition, Julian's texts, as I mentioned above, would have appeared to fit seamlessly within the mode of affective worship, due to their overall visionary content and to the fact that their author is a female in an age in which, 'positive piety is usually associated with women; [because] its "sentimental", "personalized" tropes are seen to be particularly appropriate for women.'²⁴ However, whilst they do display elements of this affective strain, including the way that the narrator writes about her experiences with the embodied Christ, these works, especially *Revelation*, as examined in chapter one, also offer aspects that could belong within the intellectual branch of late-medieval

²⁴ Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, p. 15.

spiritual seeking. As far as the matter of authorial point-of-view, numerous examples abound of Julian perceiving and explicating her visions of the desired divinity—who now manifests to her in the form of a disembodied or more removed God, one of ideas and concepts, pronouncements and commands, that demands to be understood rather than seen, or touched or felt—from the perspective of a thinker, a scholar or an exegete, rather than simply that of a visionary or devotee.

Instances of Julian's intellectual viewpoint, many of which were pointed out in the previous chapter, abound. For instance, there are the accretions of commentary that augment several passages which were purely affective in *Vision* but which acquire and share a wisdom borne of contemplation in *Revelation* (13.34-41). Additionally, there is the addition of actual chapters to the Long Text, filled with the fruits of years of self-proclaimed contemplation on the showings she had received (chapters 44-63). And there is also the proffering of a sophisticated and complex set of theological ideas and concepts, such as those laying out her theodicy²⁵ (i.e. *Revelation*, 27.5-6) and her subtle formulation of the 'sense' and 'sensuality' of the Incarnation and the bond this forms with humankind (*Revelation*, 31.17-41).

The putting forth of such ideas, as well as Julian's insistence that they are often the product of years of contemplation and meditation (which as mentioned in chapter one of this thesis has led certain critics to suggest that Julian's process of refining the teachings she received from her visions bears a

²⁵ See: Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 81 for more on the sophistication of Julian's conceptions around her inability to perceive sin.

resemblance to the monastic practice of *lectio divina*),²⁶ qualifies certain aspects of these texts for membership within the intellectual mode, even though there is no evidence and very little likelihood, due to her sex, that Julian would have received the formal, Latinate training normally associated with this tradition and customarily reserved for men.²⁷ As Turner puts it:

Unlike the typical monastic theologian, whose starting point and method of procedure are typically and explicitly scriptural, or the school theologian, who sets out theologically from a carefully formulated statement of a problem or *quaestio*, Julian's theological reflections are elicited through a process of progressive intensification and complex elaboration of particular and personal experience.²⁸

And speaking specifically of the evolution of Julian's intellectual authorial voice and output from the Short to the Long Text, Windeatt comments:

A Vision had presented a narrative self-account of an experience. In *A Revelation*, however, the unity of a narrative line gives way to the more exploratory continuum of a meditative commentary that foregrounds all the analytical

²⁶ For more on this, see: Turner, *Julian*, p. 9 and Davies, 'Transformational', pp. 39-52. Also refer to pp. 101-105 of this thesis.

²⁷ As has been mentioned earlier in this thesis, there has been speculation that Julian might have been a learned woman with access to Latinate sources, see: Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, p. 44; or Barratt, 'Holy Spirit', pp. 78-84. However, it is extremely doubtful that she would have had the sort of Latin learning and scholastic training that would have enabled her to contrive elaborate treatises to match those of other mystical male luminaries of her day, such as Meister Eckhart.

²⁸ Turner, *Julian*, p. x-xi.

subtleties of a contemplative and theologically informed mind
that discerns patterns, categorizes and sub-divides.²⁹

In short, though they may not mirror exactly the writing style or techniques of the scholarly conventions and perspective associated with the speculative strain of spiritual seeking in her era, still Julian's texts do exhibit evidence that portions of them could be classified as fitting within the intellectual mode.

The authorial voice that Julian utilises when discussing these matters of the intellect synchs very well with the tone and style prescribed for this strain of theological discourse. When opining upon intellectual matters, any excessive emotion or focus on physicality recedes or disappears completely from Julian's lexicon to be replaced with more detached, abstract descriptions and words and phrases which deal in thought and ratiocination, rather than feeling and devotional participation. At these junctures, Julian expresses notions in an analytical and systematic fashion—such as her allegorical explication of and focus upon the underlying significance and symbolic resonance of the figures and events related in the story of the Master and Servant in chapter 51³⁰—rather than focusing upon any identification with the affective responses of its characters.

For example, when she relates her initial account of this story, Julian describes it in a largely affective fashion, saying of the plight of the servant:

he sterteth and runneth in gret hast for love to do his lordes
wille. And anon he falleth in a slade, and taketh ful gret sore.

²⁹ Windeatt, 'Second Thoughts', pp. 102-3.

³⁰ See: Sutherland, "'Oure Feyth'", pp. 10-11.

And than he groneth and moneth and walloweth and writheth
(*Revelation*, 51.11-13).

Here, by utilising highly descriptive and emotion-filled language and by concentrating on depicting the emotional responses of the servant to his tumble, rather than on the underlying meaning, behind his fall, Julian displays the traits of a more affective writer.

However, later on in the chapter when she discusses the intellectual understanding of the vision, which has been attained after the almost two decades that she tells the reader that she has spent in contemplation of this story (*Revelation*, 51.73), Julian presents the same events in a markedly different tone and style. Of the servant and what befalls him, she now says:

The servant that stode before him [the Lord], I understonde
that he was shewed for Adam: that is to sey, one man was
shewed that time, and his falling, to make thereby to be
understonde how God beholdeth alle manne and his falling.
For in the sighte of God alle man is one man, and one man is
alle man (*Revelation*, 51.86-9).

In this new description of the servant and his fall, one borne as a result of the intellectual understanding she has gained, Julian eschews any references to the servant's emotional state as a result of his fate. Rather, she employs rational language, devoid of any affective words whatsoever, calmly and dispassionately to explain the mishap of the servant, whom she now reveals as Adam (and will go on to equate with Christ and all of humanity as she continues her unravelling of the allegorical story), in terms of its deeper, more complex signification. Gone is any sense of the suffering of the servant or any possible

identification with it. Julian has replaced the emotional elements common to the perspective of the affective narrator with the removed, speculative tone equated with the point-of-view of the intellectual spiritual author. Thus the servant is no longer solely a figure intended to evoke sympathy or an emotional response. He is now also, more consciously, an allegorical figure, a rhetorical tool given to her by God, as a result of her intellectual questing, to help elucidate the sophisticated and complex layers of meaning about the nature of God's connection to humankind and the part that the fall and original sin play in this relationship. In the space, therefore, of one vision, Julian's style, language and tone morph from that of affective seeker to speculative theologian.

This is all in keeping with the establishment and utilisation of an authorial perspective best suited to understanding and conveying the nature of a God of ideas, a voice more appropriate to speculative commentators than affective writers. That Julian is successful in deploying such a point-of-view can be attested to by Staley's assessment that, 'in the Long Text Julian claims for herself the authority of the exegete.... Julian, in fact, applies the (male) tools of intellectual authority to the (female) matter of experience....'³¹ Thus, Julian's texts clearly employ the perspective of affective author and some of the practices of a scholastic writer, all within the pages of a single work, as noted

³¹ Staley, 'Crisis of Authority', p. 139. For critical commentary on the development of Julian's narrative voice from affective worshipper to intellectual exegete, see: Frances McCormack 'Reading God: Visions and Revisions in Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love*', in *Transmission and Transformation in the Middle Ages: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Kathleen Cawsey and Jason Harris (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007), pp. 98-114, (p. 105); and for her familiarity with complex biblical and Latin theological concepts, see: Sutherland, "'Oure Feyth'", pp. 10-11; and Baker, 'Structure', p. 37.

above in the example cited of the two different ways that the servant and his plight were described by Julian within chapter 51 of her Long Text.

The final authorial perspective, which Julian assumes throughout the course of her texts, is that of apophatic worshipper. When her longing for a quantity that she defines as divinity leads her to an apprehension of God that appears to fall outside of her ability to express it in the words and concepts available to her—perhaps in a sense akin to Lacan’s formulation of entry into the order of the Real, a place of transgressive, blinding *jouissance* which lies entirely beyond the bounds of language and thus the capability of words to encapsulate or transmit—Julian communicates apophatically. Of this authorial perspective and one of the particular ways it manifests in her texts, Turner comments, ‘Julian gets to the same apophatic place as does the *Cloud* author by the opposite literary strategy, precisely by an excess of affirmation that, as it were, collapses under the weight of that very excessiveness.’³² Therefore, whilst also displaying the traditional naysaying voice of the apophatic seeker, as discussed in the previous chapter, Julian also manages to deliver the perception of a quantity beyond the limits of sensory apprehension or hermeneutical explication in a fashion different from the customary protestations about the inability to convey any part of God’s being, usually evidenced in works by those such as the resolutely apophatic *Cloud* author and Meister Eckhart. In these instances, Julian utilises an authorial voice which attempts to communicate a majesty too vast to portray in words—which she claims to have observed in the formless form of her desired beloved—through saying as much as possible in an excess of designation, description and detail.

³² Turner, *Julian*, p. 25. See also: Turner, *Darkness*, p. 257.

This is a process or technique which, according to Turner, eventually leads rhetorically to the same space of awed silence that offering words of negation normally would. One example of Julian's deployment of this type of prolix apophatic voice includes the following depiction of the effects of merging with the sought divine as a result of Jesus' famous declaration to her that he is everything and in everything:

The number of the words passeth my wittes and my
understanding and alle my mightes, for they were in the
highest, as to my sight. For therin is comprehended I can not
telle what... And therefore these words be not declared here.

(*Revelation*, 26.8-12).

Julian's insistence, in this passage, that the number of repetitions, as well as the increasingly exalted and magnificent significance of the phrase 'I it am,' uttered twelve times by Jesus, surpass the capacity of her wits and the limits of her understanding matches up seamlessly with traditional apophatic claims of inability to unravel, explain or begin to express the nature of the divinity that has been encountered. The amount of explication that Julian employs to convey this typical apophatic protestation of the inadequacy of comprehension and language actually falls within the purview of the more verbose language of unsaying posited by Turner.

Another example of this 'garrulous' apophatic voice being employed by Julian occurs when—after first declaring that the experience transcends her ability to imagine (or presumably express)—she nonetheless tries to convey, with a virtual gushing of evocative words, the inexpressible feeling of being drawn, by grace, into oneness with God through love. She states:

And therewith I saw that his continual werking in alle maner
things is done so godly, so wisely, and so mightely that it
overpasseth alle oure imagining and alle that we can wene or
thinke... with his swete grace, in our owne meke , continual
prayer [we] come into him now in this life by many prevy
touchinges of swete, gostly sightes and felinges, mesured to us
as oure simplihed may bere it (*Revelation*, 43.31-3 and 36-8).

So, faced with the utter impossibility of accurately conveying experiences that she claims to be so profound that they defy description, Julian nevertheless attempts to accomplish the feat. She does this through deploying a particular type of apophatic authorial voice that, contrary to the more accepted definition of apophasis, uses very descriptive words, in an effort to try and transmit, in positive and evocative terms, the ineffable and transcendent experiences of magnificence, revealed to her about the formless form of her divine beloved.

Based on the evidence I have supplied in the preceding passages, a picture should be forming of the incidence of three separate narrative voices or perspectives in Julian's texts, which can be associated respectively with the prevailing spiritual modes of affective, intellectual and unitive worship. Yet, despite her deployment of these conventional points-of-view, Julian's usage of them is decidedly unconventional, as she utilises them interchangeably and dialectically within the same work. Whereas a typical work of affective devotion, such as Nicholas Love's *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, a version of the highly influential late-medieval text, the *Meditationes Vitae*

Christi,³³ would have dealt exclusively with devotion to the Incarnate Christ, and particularly affective imitation of his suffering in the Passion, utilising as such a more emotional tone and writing style, Julian's texts stray from the affective subject matter and deploy other tones and styles. Similarly, whereas a classic intellectual work of spiritual seeking, such as Thomas Aquinas' late-thirteenth-century *Summa theologiae*,³⁴ focused solely on presenting systematic theological arguments, presented in a rational and non-emotional tone and voice,³⁵ Julian's texts intersperse rational and analytical construction and proof of certain theological ideas, such as the conclusion that there is no such thing as sin with affective, emotionally wrought scenes of Christ's Passion.

One example of the seamless shifting of tone and style and perspective from affective to intellectual occurs in the shift between the more affective second showing and the more speculative third showing. In the second showing, which opens with Julian gazing at Christ on the cross, Julian describes her response to the sight of Jesus' blood-caked face on the crucifix, remarking, in true affective affinity with the suffering of her beloved, 'my spirites were in great traveyle in the beholding: morning, dredful, and longing' (*Revelation*, 10.25-6). Here she displays a hallmark of the affective worshipper and the typical writing style associated with such devotion: emotional language depicting shared suffering with Christ's torments on the cross.

³³ Isa Ragusa and R. Green, eds and trans, *Meditations on the Life of Christ* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

³⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *The "Summa theologia" of St. Thomas Aquinas Part III, First Number QQ.I-XXVI Vol.15 literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province* (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1920).

³⁵ Turner, *Julian*, pp. 1-6.

Yet, as the third revelation begins, all emotional language has vanished as Julian describes her intellectual response to the sight of ‘God in a pointe’ (*Revelation*, 11.1). Julian expounds upon the meaning of this unusual vision in the tone and style of an exegete, declaring dispassionately that the sight of God in a point signifies to her the understanding that, ‘he is in al thing’ (*Revelation*, 11.2). In this case, the ‘point’ in which God manifests to Julian appears to refer to a location in space, rather than in time.³⁶ Nonetheless, when Julian perceives this phenomenon of divinity in a spatial spot, time does still enter into the equation—in the sense that temporality does cease to be a factor in the experience she is relating. Time, in effect, stops. God alone is all, all that is and ever will be, all concentrated in this one point in space, this eternal (and eternally present) location that both originates all of time and also (in this vision) suspends it, indeterminately, if not indefinitely.³⁷

Julian expands on this multi-layered experience of ‘God in a pointe’, when she states, ‘I beheld with avisement, seeing and knowing in that sight that he doth alle that is done’ (*Revelation*, 11.2-3). Delivered in the more measured tone and with words designed to explain concepts rather than evoke emotional response, Julian calmly and confidently relates this complex concept, in order to introduce an even more sophisticated theological notion.

³⁶ Julian makes this distinction clear, further on in the chapter, when she refers to God being ‘in the mid point of alle thinges’ (*Revelation*, 11.16).

³⁷ This discussion or allusion to ‘God in a pointe’ seems to be part of Julian’s strategy of ‘naughting’ or effacing and eventually erasing the individual soul, identity and/or awareness, in order to try and merge with the divine beloved. By focusing exclusively on this point, in which everything exists in a state of suspension, any individual perspective external to this point disappears and thus can be naughted.

For she utilises her understanding that God is in everything and does everything, in order to make the point that, if that is truly the case, then everything is of the substance of God's being and is the result of his will. Therefore, as she puts it interrogatively, "What is sinne" (*Revelation*, 11.4)? Under such circumstances, how can sin exist? So, from one chapter to the next, Julian shifts from an affective description of Christ's Passion to a speculative and highly sophisticated intellectual argument about the non-existence of sin, switching the tone, voice and language she employs to match the subject matter she is describing.

Finally, whereas a unitive text such as the late-fourteenth-century *Cloud of Unknowing* concentrates on describing an ineffable God in an apophatic manner that insists upon the impossibility of language ever capturing or even approaching a semblance of the divine, Julian's works, as evidenced earlier in this thesis, flirt with the conclusions and tone and style of negative theology, whilst still weaving into and out of cataphatic affective, sections, as well as, rational and logic-based intellectual passages.

That this was unusual can be ascertained by looking at the evidence of other spiritual or mystical texts of the era, which tend to choose and adhere to a mode of approaching God and a writing style that matches that mode, rather than alternating between systems and respective authorial points-of-view. Indeed Watson states of Julian's books that he knows of 'no other visionary material which combines "bodily" and "ghostly" sight with any of the almost polyphonic complexity [that they display].'³⁸ Similarly, Abbott weighs in on Julian's unusual combining of themes and perspectives, in *Revelation* in

³⁸ Watson, 'Trinitarian Hermeneutic', p. 86.

particular, when he states, 'the LT is such a peculiar and astonishing work: in its thematic range and ambition, in its organization and coherence, in its intellectual and linguistic precision, in its variety of tone.'³⁹ I would now like to delve deeper into one of the possible reasons why Julian employs such a variety of perspectives—her attempt effectively to portray the ever-shifting images and understandings of her desired God, her sought Thing—in light of Lacan's discussion of the concept which he refers to as anamorphosis.

Anamorphosis and Authorial Perspective in Julian's Texts

Julian of Norwich's implementation of a range of different authorial identities within her texts can be viewed in terms of the overarching motivation which I believe underlies Julian's works—her stated longing for and pursuit of God or, seen through the Lacanian lens, her desire for the Thing. In terms of this reading, Julian's desire for her coveted Lord causes her, as she explicitly states and implicitly suggests time and again, to follow this quantity as it morphs and jumps dialectically into and between various versions of God, ranging from the tangible form of the bleeding Incarnation to an ineffable, formless sense of unity or *jouissance*. This reflects Lacan's conception of a metonymy of desire playing out within the form or series of forms known by him as *objet petit a*. In order for Julian accurately and fully to portray her cycling and shifting apprehensions of her sought God, it is necessary for her to morph and adapt the authorial voices she employs. In this fashion alone will she be able to match and represent each particular guise of God in the correct literary format associated with each version of divinity that approximates to the accepted modes of

³⁹ Abbott, *Autobiography and Theology*, p. xii.

spiritual seeking—affective, intellectual and unitive—during the late Middle Ages.

In order better to illumine this practice of Julian's, borne of her longing for a forever-morphing, desired God or Thing, there is another Lacanian formulation (though one that still stems from and relates to the overarching theme of desire for the Thing) which can help to shed further light on the matter—his concept of anamorphosis.

Having provided evidence that Julian does not constrain herself to offering the details and revelations depicted in her works from only one angle or one accepted subject position, it seems reasonable to conclude that, 'Julian has a very complex understanding of "seeing".'⁴⁰ One way possibly to understand why Julian's search for her desired God may result in a shifting of not only what is portrayed as being perceived, but also in the tone and style and even identity of the person claiming to be the perceiver, the author, can be found in Lacan's discussion, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, on the topic of sight in relation to how subjects interact with objects and thus their environments, based in part upon how and what they see and what and who sees them.

Essentially Lacan's thesis on the role that vision plays in how a subject defines him- or herself starts off from the premise that, according to Joan Copjec, who applies these Lacanian principles to the arena of film criticism, 'that which is produced by a signifying system can never be determinate...

⁴⁰ Louise Nelstrop, Kevin Magill and Bradley B. Onishi, *Christian Mysticism: An Introduction to Contemporary Theoretical Approaches* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), p. 165.

[thus] no position defines a resolute identity.’⁴¹ Therefore, in Lacan’s formulation, no matter how solid or unwavering an image (be it a visual sight or a mental impression) might seem to the perceiver—due to the instability of a reality composed of ever-shifting signifiers, determined and re-determined by the definitions of the Other and constantly challenged by the individual’s transgressive desire for the Thing, for *jouissance*, for annihilation of unmerged subjectivity itself in the realm of the Real—it is all nothing more than an optical illusion, a chimerical apparition apt to shimmer and disappear the moment one draws near or shifts positions.

In order better to illustrate the ramifications of his overall formulation, Lacan introduces the concept of anamorphosis. Anamorphosis, which refers to ‘the name given in art history to the technique whereby a distorted perspective is restored to legibility when viewed through an unusual contrivance (like a cylindrical mirror) or from an unexpected angle,’⁴² is co-opted by Lacan to help him explain why perception is always contingent on desire and how that factor inevitably renders not only sight, but the identity of the seer, the subject, endlessly susceptible to shifting perspectives. This concept can be very helpful in illuminating why Julian, in her texts, appears to see her sought God in a number of different ways and from a variety of lenses—one moment speaking as the imitative, emotional co-sufferer of Christ’s abjections of the affective mode (*Revelation*, 17.41-50), the next as the calm, rational exegete of the intellectual strain (*Revelation*, 21.12-6) and finally as the naysaying, apophatic seeker of the unitive mode (*Revelation*, 26.8-13).

⁴¹ Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), p.18.

⁴² Sarah Kay, *Žižek: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), p. 50.

Specifically Lacan bases or centres his formulation of anamorphosis, which he relates in particular to Holbein the Younger's painting in the National Gallery in London entitled *The Ambassadors*, on the object that houses the optical illusion itself. In Holbein's anamorphic painting (which to Lacan stands in for all sorts of examples of this artistic optical illusion), from most angles, whilst the picture itself can be seen clearly in its entirety, the site of anamorphosis appears only as a shapeless, inexplicable spot on the canvas. However, once one positions oneself at the correct angle, predetermined by the artist who has created this illusion, the floating blob immediately transforms into a recognizable image (in the case of the *Ambassadors*, when you walk, for instance, to the right of the painting and stand at just the perfect spot, the formless shape in the foreground morphs into the clearly recognisable depiction of a death's head, a skull). To Lacan this anamorphic blot, which he designates as the stain or spot,⁴³ and which Žižek rephrases as, 'the real object, the blot,'⁴⁴ refers to object *a*, or that within the frame which gestures towards the Thing, the truly desired quantity which beckons from the order of the Real, constantly threatening to destabilise the entire composition. As Gaunt puts it, 'anamorphosis, for Lacan, is a mechanism that inevitably allows the oblique apprehension of the Thing because, in throwing starkly into relief the incommensurability of two symbolic planes, it draws attention to the Real that escapes both.'⁴⁵ Yet even though, in Lacan's formulation, the Real can never fully be attained, other than in moments of fleeting interpenetration, still the

⁴³ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 97.

⁴⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 96.

⁴⁵ Gaunt, *Love and Death*, p. 38.

value of anamorphosis lies in its very ability to draw one's attention to the true cause that lies behind all desire for the Thing. Because, even if one cannot actually become established in the Real, awareness of its very existence, looming there just between an object that shimmers and coalesces into and out of meaning in the foreground of a world that similarly and reflexively goes in and out of focus, can be enough to precipitate movement towards it and perhaps into *jouissance*, thus effecting transformation within the desiring subject.

One can witness perhaps an example in Julian's texts that her relentless cycling and circling through different apprehensions and descriptions of her desired God could approximate that aspect of Lacan's concept of anamorphosis, which results in an oblique view of the Real, and thus the Thing itself lurking beyond, in her depictions of sudden and all-too-brief moments of transcendent, all-encompassing joy or *jouissance*-like bliss. In one such portrayal of these fleeting visitations of ecstasy, Julian states:

oure blessed lorde gave me again the comfort and the rest in soule: liking and sekernesse so blisseful and so mighty that no drede, ne sorow, ne no paine bodely ne gostely that might be sufferede shulde have dissesede me. And than the paine shewed again to my feling, and than the joy and the liking, and now that one, and now that other, diverse times, I suppose about twenty times. And in the time of joy, I might have saide with Saint Paule: "Nothing shalle departe me fro the charite of Crist." And in the paine, I might have said with Saint Peter: "Lord, save me, I perish" (*Revelation*, 15.9-16).

This poignant portrayal of a bliss and peace beyond measure being bestowed and retracted over and over again to be replaced with the agony of her deathbed, but also the torment of ecstasy lost, brings to mind the image of a curtain being opened and closed, opened and closed tantalisingly revealing and then hurriedly concealing—in a slightly different version of anamorphosis, one in which the blob or blot not only loses its coherent appearance, but disappears altogether from sight once one's angle has shifted—the long-sought-after prize, the beloved God or Thing. A deeper understanding of this experience can be found through drawing parallels to its similarity to the lightning-quick bursts of *jouissance* that Lacan posits as the reward (or punishment) that awaits those who follow their desire past the limits of the Symbolic and Imaginary orders and into the realm of the Real,⁴⁶ where the Thing beckons. Such an experience also helps to explain the relentlessness of Julian's search. Once having tasted this pleasure beyond all reckoning, how can she bear to cease experiencing another and another and yet another transporting, if brief, immersion in its depths?

This analysis gains greater resonance in light of Gilbert's comment that Lacan's discussion of anamorphosis is 'conceived as a means of projecting this haunting other dimension, reminding audiences that the reality within which they live is contingent, a mere Symbolic and Imaginary order, and reconnecting them with that Real dimension which is the birthplace of fertility and meaning, as well as their negation.'⁴⁷ The means by which this spurring motion towards the Real is effected, in Lacan's conception of anamorphosis, involves the

⁴⁶ See for instance: Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 177.

⁴⁷ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 12.

subject's situation in relation to the visual field of the painting. Therefore, for anamorphosis to achieve its optimal disruptive purpose, within the Lacanian framework, all depends upon the element of perspective. So, the angle from which the subject sees the picture will decide how and what is perceived. The effort the subject makes to shift positions and angles, most importantly, will determine whether s/he, as Žižek phrases it, begins 'shifting from reality to the real... moving from an overall view of reality to its point of anamorphosis,'⁴⁸ or whether s/he simply continues to view the world from the relative safety and comfort of the illusory positions associated with the Symbolic and Imaginary realms.

Intentionality, therefore, determined, at least in Julian of Norwich's case, by the intensity of one's desire and the commitment to follow it beyond all limits, to wherever it may lead, plays a substantial role in the ability of anamorphosis to offer a signpost that leads past the vision of object *a* and straight to the Thing beyond it, thus luring one into the domain of the Real. It is not enough simply to see the anamorphic blot, in order truly to engage with the Real, in order fully to follow one's desire for the Thing, the subject must chase this stain in the painting in order to determine the optimal angle from which best to perceive the form that hides, and intermittently discloses, the desired entity lurking within. As Lacan explains, in order to attain the anamorphic perspective, what is required is 'the regulation of form, which is governed, not only by the subject's eye, but by his expectations, his movement, his grip, his muscular and visceral emotion—in short his constitutive presence, directed in

⁴⁸ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 95.

what is called his total intentionality.⁴⁹ So, according to a certain aspect of Lacan's concept of anamorphosis, a subject can control, to some degree, her or his apprehension of or access to a sight of the desired Thing through shifting angles and sightlines in order to keep its various forms, denoted by Lacan as object *a*,⁵⁰ in view and in focus.

This shifting of positions in order to follow the desired quantity, which in the case of Julian's texts refers to an elusive and ever-changing deity, is precisely what, I would like to argue, is being reflected in the 'dizzying changes of visual and intellectual perspective,'⁵¹ the switching from one authorial voice and persona to another within her books. I contend that she moves from the position of affective visionary to intellectual exegete to apophatic worshipper, assuming not only the conventional literary tones and styles of these narrative voices, but also their actual viewpoints, not only in order to gain authority or to enact the most effective literary strategy, but largely in order to find and adopt the very best angle from which to see, understand and convey the truth about whatever manifestation may be presenting itself, in any given moment, of her desired God, her coveted Thing.

Of course, since the Thing never settles within any object, since its role, according to Lacan, is rather to keep jumping from object to object, eliciting greater and greater desire with which to destabilise the illusory orders that trap humanity in their web of signifiers and signified, it stands to reason that, as

⁴⁹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 71.

⁵⁰ See: Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 103. Also see: Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 125.

⁵¹ Gillespie, 'Pastiche', p. 192.

Mills puts it, 'in a Lacanian argument *no* position produces a stable identity.'⁵²

Thus, whilst Julian's texts display a revolving sequence of authorial perspectives, one is never sure which of these voices or points of view, if any of them at all, actually belong to or could be equated with any fixed position of Julian's herself. Instead, just like the interchangeable figures and significations of Adam, Jesus and the entirety of humanity, which she lays out so artfully in her recounting of the parable of the Master and Servant in chapter 51, Julian's authorial identities morph and switch from one to the other and back again, all, I would argue, in search of a coveted quantity that continually keeps changing form and meaning.

Finally, I would like to suggest that Julian's shifting perspectives might possibly coalesce into something akin to the voice or perspective of the Thing itself, the desired quantity, which in Julian's case she designates as divine. For instance in the table of contents⁵³ of *Revelation*, in her entry on the thirteenth showing, Julian actually proffers a quotation purportedly directly from God, one that states: "Behold and see, for by the same might, wisdom, and goodnes that I have done all this, by the same might, wisdom, and goodnes I shall make well all that is not well, and thou shalt see it" (1.35-7). However, in her actual account of the thirteenth revelation, these words never appear again. This example and others like it lead Elisabeth Dutton to remark upon, 'a curious aspect of the presentation of voices in the *Revelation*. In a number of cases, Julian presents as

⁵² Mills, 'Troubled Looks', p. 131.

⁵³ Whilst most tables of content tended to be scribal additions to texts at this time, some critics believe that, in this case, it has been created by Julian herself. Most notably, see: Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, p. 284, n. 51.

direct speech, as locution, words which are not in fact given by God.’⁵⁴ Divine speech that emanates from a narrative source other than God could lead one to speculate whether or not, at certain points in her narrative, perhaps Julian speaks from a fourth perspective from which to approach her divine beloved, a position so close to the anamorphic stain that rather than perceiving it clearly, she enters into it and looks out from and speaks from the vantage point of the Real, the abode of the desired Thing.

It is just this vantage point of the Real which I believe Lacan is addressing when he refers to a place within the painting which, instead of being seen and fixed by his eyes, his vision, takes the initiative and gazes out at him. He states, ‘It is rather it that grasps me, solicits me at every moment, and makes of the landscape something other than a landscape, something other than what I have called the picture.’⁵⁵ Žižek further elucidates this place or identity of perception when he states, ‘This is the point at which the observer is already included, inscribed in the observed scene—in a way, it is the point from which the picture itself looks back at us.’⁵⁶ Therefore, the anamorphic spot, the locus of the Thing and threshold to the Real, which the subject can access or contact by shifting his or her perspective according to Lacanian theory, can also act as a reciprocal viewpoint from which the Thing or the Real can watch the subject. And more than watch as well, for, as Lacan says of that which gazes out from this anamorphic blot, ‘not only does it look, *it also shows*.’⁵⁷ It is this act of showing—which is exactly what Julian’s texts represent in that her visions are

⁵⁴ Elisabeth Dutton, *Julian of Norwich: The Influence of Late-Medieval Devotional Compilations* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), p. 72.

⁵⁵ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 96.

⁵⁶ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 91.

⁵⁷ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 75.

literary depictions of what God was, in some sense, literally showing her and what she, in turn wishes to show all of Christendom—coupled with Julian’s rare adaptation of a voice that appears to emanate from a narrative position far beyond the three authorial perspectives with which she usually writes which prompts Ena Jenkins to comment that, ‘for Julian, sight has become understanding; here she sees as God sees.’⁵⁸ This leads me to posit that, perhaps this seemingly divine perspective reflects the sightline of the Thing itself, suggesting that, momentarily at least, Julian speaks from the position of the Real in some way.

As Sutherland comments on Julian’s writings, ‘what sets her apart from the traditions on which she draws as well as from her contemporaries is, therefore, the consummate skill with which she manages to occupy the positions of both *interpreter* and *interpreted*, of both *exegete* and *text*.’⁵⁹ In this position as text, or perhaps as painting, that which is read or viewed, is Julian perhaps reflecting the perspective of that desired quantity which she has sought to read and to see throughout the course of her self-described journey and which she eventually claims to find within her own soul? Has she, in effect, fallen through the anamorphic stain and entered into the Real, a place from which she temporarily speaks in the voice and from the point-of-view of the longed for Thing?

I will discuss this concept further and in greater depth in the next section which deals with Julian’s concept of the soul as God or, in terms of a Lacanian prism, subject as object.

⁵⁸ Jenkins, ‘Web of Metaphor’, p. 186.

⁵⁹ Sutherland, “Oure Feyth”, p. 18.

The Soul as God or Subject as Object

As has been discussed in the preceding section, the evidence in Julian's texts appears to suggest that her willingness to follow her insatiable longing for her coveted Lord, or in Lacanian terms, her desire for the Thing, wherever it may lead, results in works that display a cyclical, dialectical and non-linear manifestation of varying versions of God (and authorial methods of describing such guises of divinity) that fit within the three prevailing modes of late-medieval, spiritual seeking—the affective, intellectual and unitive modes.

I would now like to discuss the development that, having pursued the true cause of her desire through the various forms and formless intimations within which it seems temporarily to take up residence, Julian eventually, especially in the Long Text, seems to locate this yearned-for deity within a new and surprisingly close and intimate place—the human soul. Julian first begins to approach this somewhat radical (though, not, as will be explored in the coming pages, unprecedented) conclusion from a more oblique angle than she will later adopt, when she offers certain images that deal with mutual enclosure.⁶⁰

One such famous example of Julian's enclosure imagery occurs in her account of Jesus leading her into the wound in his chest. She writes:

With a glad chere oure good lorde loked into his side and
behelde, enjoyenge. And with his swete loking he led forth the
understanding of his creature by the same wound into his sid,
within. And ther he shewed a fair, delectable place, and large

⁶⁰ For an extended discussion on Julian's use of imagery of mutual enclosure to discuss the connection between the soul and God, see: Baker, 'Varieties', pp. 53-63; Turner, *Julian*, pp. 196-200; and Miles, 'Space and Enclosure', pp. 154-165.

inow for alle mankinde that shalle be saved to rest in pees
and in love (*Revelation*, 24.1-4).

Whilst, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, it is not uncommon to find, within affective accounts from the period, enactments that portray entry into Christ's side, usually as part of a larger narrative of Jesus as Mother offering succour to his devotees via the life-giving blood (or milk) streaming from his side (or breast),⁶¹ Julian's iteration of this well-utilised trope expands the metaphor and in the process the boundaries of Christ's wound considerably. As Turner states, 'that enclosure of Julian's understanding within the side of Jesus is no constriction of her selfhood... On the contrary, Julian's confinement within the narrow wound in the side of Christ is an opening out of Julian's own selfhood to a universal consciousness so vast as to enclose her evencristen, the whole Church.'⁶² Indeed, even though entering a seemingly confined space and allowing herself to be enwrapped, Julian ends up expanding this area of supposed enclosure until it not only encompasses her within its limits, but extends to swallow the entire length and breadth of creation as well, managing to include, in the end, the very Incarnation within which it ostensibly purports to rest. Thus, Julian begins to construct the case for an inherent connection between humanity and divinity, in that each one can be found, in some way, inextricably within the other.

⁶¹ For more on the history and incidences of this trope within medieval affective literature, see: Beckwith, *Christ's Body*, pp. 56-9. For critical explorations and assessments of the significance of the way this opening into Christ's side was portrayed in affective literature, particularly in terms of a lactating breast, menstruating woman or birthing mother, see: Bynum, *Holy Feast*, pp. 260-1, 263, 271-2 and Beckwith *Christ's Body*, p. 58. Finally, for a discussion of this wound as representing an eroticised opening akin to the vulva, see Riehle, *Middle English*, p. 46.

⁶² Turner, *Julian*, p. 201.

As her understanding appears to deepen, after years of self-declared contemplation on her initial sixteen visions, this growth in comprehension seems to be reflected in a growing confidence displayed in her words and in the complexity of her ideas as *Revelation* unfolds. Thus, Julian eventually replaces this initial subtle foreshadowing of an innate interconnectivity between God and humanity with an explicit declaration of intersection between the human and the divine. She states:

And thus I saw full sekerly that it is redier to us and more esy
to come to the knowing of God then to know oure owne soule.
For oure soule is so depe grounded in God and so endlesly
tresored, that we may not come to the knowing thereof tille
we have furst knowing of God, which is the maker to whome
it is oned (*Revelation*, 56.1-5).

Therefore, in this remarkable quotation, Julian actually appears to be suggesting that, after all the affective contact and subsequent intellectual probing she has practised, in order better to know and love her coveted Lord, the object of her fevered desire, she has finally reached the conclusion, that it is, in fact, the human soul which is harder to apprehend than the longed-for divinity. Furthermore, she intimates in this passage, the nature of the soul needs to be pursued just as fervently, and perhaps even more so, if one is truly to attain the divine object of desire, the coveted beloved or in Lacanian terminology the Thing, which is, she now overtly implies, inextricably united to the soul.

Julian underlines this last point even further when she states: 'oure owne soule wher oure lord wonneth... ther shall we finde alle: now, in faith and

in understanding, and after, verily in himselfe, clerely, in blisse' (*Revelation*, 62.20-22). Undeniably, here, she is choosing to situate God, her worshipped divinity, her craved beloved, directly within the environs of the soul. And, just in case the full significance of this statement and all of its implications might elude any of her readers, Julian makes it clear that this aspect of God within the soul is not merely symbolic. Rather she declares that it is actually an empirical reality so complete that it encompasses everything that anyone could ever long to know or experience of divinity or creation, itself. Yet, far from existing somewhere remote, or in any of the modes or avenues where she has heretofore sought it, this desired divine actually resides right here within her own soul. Ironically, it has been in the soul all along, closer to her than the crucifix above her bed upon which she focused when she originally received her sixteen showings, that Julian ultimately claims to locate 'alle' that she has been seeking, even if the full implications that this entails are still to unfold.

In order to explain the reasoning that led her to arrive at such a conclusion, which drew her to pinpoint the existence of God within the soul, Julian proceeds to offer a very intricate explication of the 'substance' and 'sensualite' of both the incarnation and humanity which is so interwoven and inter-layered with meaning as to imbue the physical with divine potentiality and the divine with concrete form and heft, unsullied by the more sordid repercussions of sensual existence. Julian manages to accomplish this quite subtle feat of theological reasoning by equating all that is transcendent and unable to be stained with the godly substance and attributing all that is susceptible to corruptible forces to the physical, ephemeral sensualite. As she explains, in one passage:

God is kind in his being: that is to sey, that goodnesse that is kind, it is God. He is the grounde, he is the substance, he is the same thing that is kindhede, and he is very fader and very moder of kindes. And alle kindes that he hath made to flowe out of him to werke his wille, it shall be restored and brought againe into him by salvation of man throw the werking of grace. For of all kindes that he hath set in diverse creatures by party, in man is alle the hole in fullhed and in vertu, in fairhed and in goodhed, in ryalte and noblye, in alle manner of solempnite of precioushede and wurshippe (*Revelation*, 62.10-17).

In this quotation, therefore, Julian uncompromisingly declares that all that is good in nature, in created reality, is composed of the actual substance of God. And this essential goodness, which makes up all that has been manifested by the divine, and which is the very substance of divinity itself, reaches its highest potentiality within and through mankind. For this reason, Julian concludes and insists that the salvation of a human being, through grace, restores the 'kind'—the fundamental goodness, the very substance of divinity—which lies dormant within the soul, to its full expression and power, *as God*. Thus, Julian clearly asserts, God is the source of humankind's very fabric, the material that composes and comprises the building blocks of both a human being's physicality, as well as his or her very existential essence.

From the groundwork of this claim, Julian can not only, as she does above, suggest that humanity is innately good and godlike due to its divine origins, but she can further contend that, 'we be all bounde to God for kind, and

we be bounde to God for grace... us nedeth not gretly to seke ferre out to know sondry kindes, but... into oure owne soule wher oure lord wonneth' (*Revelation*, 62.18-21). This explicitly constructs both God and human soul to be naturally formed from the same physical material, as well as the same grace or divine intention. Thus, in order to discover the location of the divine, which exists within every aspect of manifest nature, one need not look any further than one's own soul, which, because it houses God, also contains the entirety of created nature, itself. Similarly, if one longs to uncover the essence of divinity, in its unmanifest and formless state, one need only turn within. Additionally, the grace and intentionality, which emanates from the divine, also lives and operates from and within the human soul, ultimately willing (or desiring) the reassimilation or merging of a human being's body and essence back into union with its original divine source.

Baker states, 'Julian's assertion that the substance or higher part of the soul remains connected to the divine substance is the basis of her claim that to know God is to know the self.'⁶³ Through this justification, this explanation that she has discovered that mankind's very being is formed from the very substance of God, her desired quantity, Julian arrives at her accompanying premise that, truly to find that which she has been longing for all along so diligently and intensely—her sought beloved, or the elusive Thing in Lacanian terminology—she must turn within in order to experience what she most yearns for or desires, which now appears to dwell inside her own soul.

Whilst, on the face of it, this may seem to have been a rather unusual, if not controversial, conclusion to draw, in actuality Julian would have been able,

⁶³ Baker, 'Structure', p. 41.

in her late-medieval theological climate, to find a healthy number of precedents to back up her vision of the soul in God or the soul as a partial aspect of God. One very rich and influential source of reinforcement for her claim would have been located in Augustine's position on the interiority of God. Whilst as Colledge and Walsh suggest in their discussion of her potential sources,⁶⁴ Julian might not have directly had access to Augustine's writings, many scholars do agree that her notion of 'the mutual indwelling of God in the soul and the soul in God is a concept that Julian could have derived from the Augustinian tradition.'⁶⁵ To begin with, on the most fundamental of levels, Julian's conception of the soul as God shares very similar characteristics to Augustine's contention that God, who is higher than the soul, is still nevertheless also attainable through and ultimately in this same soul itself—a belief he lays out when he states in *Confessions*, 'What then do I love when I love my God? Who is he who is higher than the highest element in my soul? Through my soul I will ascend to him.'⁶⁶ Augustine arrives at his version of this realisation, like Julian, as the result of a desire-fuelled spiritual search for a sought quantity whom he identifies as God, but whose elusive and ever-morphing shapes, forms and understandings, can also lend itself to be seen in terms of Lacan's formulation of the ever-desired Thing. Like Lacan's Thing, Augustine's (and Julian's) desired quantity displays the qualities of an insatiably sought substance that hides and resides within a metonymic set of objects (all known collectively as *petit objet*

⁶⁴ Colledge and Walsh, *Showings*, p. 44.

⁶⁵ Baker, 'Structure', p. 42. For more critical suggestions that Julian was drawing her ideas about the mutuality of the soul and God from some type of exposure to Augustinian concepts on the topic, see: Turner, *Julian*, p. 201 and Baker, 'Varieties', p. 61.

⁶⁶ Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 185.

a), tantalising the seeker with the promise of an ultimate satisfaction that is only ever briefly tasted in moments of transgressive, transformative, extra-linguistic encounters with what the mystics call union with the divine, often described in terms of an exquisitely pleasurable pain, which in Lacanian parlance is known as *jouissance*.⁶⁷ To Augustine and Julian, ultimately this union in the soul with the sought divine appears to be possible; yet, to Lacan—whose concept of the Real in which the Thing lurks beckoning those who chase desire past all limits, is not predicated on the existence of God, but rather on the permanent absence or death of God⁶⁸—this lasting or tangible experience of tasting or merging with the desired Thing can never truly be apprehended, or at least not in a sphere of experience governed by words and signification.

In regards to Augustine's unceasing search for his desired God and his apparent willingness to follow his desire wherever it led him, like Julian, it appears to have resulted in his discovery that, in the final analysis, the goal of his spiritual journey, at least in part, resided the whole time within his own being or soul. As Turner explains, 'He sought, but did not find, until... he came to realize that God had been there all the time, not principally as that seeking's object, but more fundamentally within the seeking itself as its source and ground.'⁶⁹ In other words, once he actually locates the quantity he has been so feverishly pursuing, through the methodology of seeking or tracing his own 'memories' back to their origin, he ultimately locates this divine beloved within himself, pre-existent within the soul, as part of his own essence.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 202.

⁶⁸ Lacan, *Ethics*, pp. 179-81.

⁶⁹ Turner, *Julian*, p. 140.

⁷⁰ Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 200-1.

Augustine, as a result of his questing and seeking, concludes, 'You were within and I was in the external world and sought you there.'⁷¹ In this manner, he uncovers, in essence, that, 'there is something eternal within the soul, a place of overlap with God... There can be no doubt that his discovery of God and his discovery of the self are one and the same.'⁷² Somehow, mysteriously, in the process, the desired God he finds within, since it is connected to the soul in some inextricable fashion, manages vastly to expand the notion of the soul. As Turner states, 'For Augustine, God is to be sought within and not in some exterior object, and yet, when found, he is discovered to transcend and also draw into harmony all relations of within and without.'⁷³ Thus, as with Julian's metaphors of enclosure and her overt statement of soul as God, Augustine's introspective mysticism arrives at the similar conclusion that the God he discovers within as the result of his search for the sought beloved, the yearned-for Thing, actually serves as both divine quantity and interior aspect of the human being, both object and cause of desire, both passive sought and active seeker, both beckoning God and receptive, responsive soul.

Julian's debt to Augustine in her discovery and relation of soul as God has been remarked upon by many critics, such as Baker, who says, 'Julian of Norwich subscribes to the paradigm of introspective mysticism derived from Augustine... Augustine seeks an understanding of the transcendent Trinity by looking to the *imago Dei* immanent in his higher reason. Julian likewise finds the image of the triune God in the soul.'⁷⁴ And, comparing a specific statement

⁷¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 201.

⁷² Nelstrop, Magill and Onishi, *Christian Mysticism*, p. 72.

⁷³ Turner, *Julian*, pp. 197-8.

⁷⁴ Baker, 'Structure', pp. 37-8.

in Julian's texts to Augustine's writings, Turner states, 'the theme is overtly Augustinian. Where he says that God is "more within me than I am to myself," Julian says, "God is more nerer to us than oure owne soule."' ⁷⁵ Thus, to some scholars, Julian's conception of the soul as or in God betrays distinctly Augustinian resonances.

However, Augustine need not have provided Julian's only influence in arriving at or defending such a contention. In fact, there were several prominent, and some decidedly controversial, contemporary theological voices from which she could have drawn support for her formulation of the indwelling God as making up part, if not the total essence, of the soul itself. In particular, there was a prominent mode of late-medieval mystical writing, practised by authors, such as Meister Eckhart (in the first half of the fourteenth century), Marguerite Porete (in the early fourteenth century), Hadewijch of Antwerp (in the first half of the thirteenth century) and Mechtild of Magdeburg (in the latter half of the thirteenth century), ⁷⁶ which described the soul as being fundamentally established in God. Julian was connected to this writing tradition, according to Baker, in that her 'references to the ground of the soul reveal the same concern with "the exemplary or virtual pre-existence of the soul in God"'. ⁷⁷ Baker opines further on the topic of Julian's possible influences in her description of the soul as grounded in God, when she states, 'Although

⁷⁵ Turner, *Julian*, p. 201.

⁷⁶ As Baker states, whilst there is no evidence that Julian had read any of these authors, still 'further investigation of the similarities and differences between her ideas about God as the ground of being and those of her continental predecessors are warranted.' Baker, 'Varieties', p. 63.

⁷⁷ Baker, 'Varieties', p. 62. She quotes from Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism, 1200-1350* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), p. 214.

there is no evidence that Julian knew the works of the Beguines or their German successors, her emphasis on the pre-existence of the soul in the Logos for all eternity and the substantial union between the human and the divine resembles theirs.⁷⁸ Many of these would have constituted somewhat safe, if not entirely orthodox, influences that could have related to Julian's finding of God in the soul, since they were—from Augustine to the Beguines—all very careful never to blur the line between humanity and divinity, whilst somehow nevertheless attributing an identification of divine status to the human soul.

However, the more dangerous level of association between the soul and God was left up to those such as Meister Eckhart, whose teachings asserted an indistinct connection between God and humankind, a position he makes clear with statements such as:

There she [the soul] is so purely one that she has no other being than the same being that is his—that is, the soul-being. This being is a beginning of all the work that God works in heaven and on earth. It is an origin and a ground of all his divine work. The soul loses her nature and her being and her life and is born in the Godhead.... She is so much one there that there is no distinction save that he remains God and she soul.⁷⁹

Statements such as these, in which Eckhart declares that there is virtually no distinction between the soul and God, resulted in him facing censure and trials

⁷⁸ Baker, 'Structure', p. 43.

⁷⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), p. 6. McGinn is quoting and translating from the *Predigt* of Meister Eckhart, Pr. 98 (= Par. An. No. 55).

in theological courts.⁸⁰ Similarly Marguerite Porete was executed in Paris in 1310, partially because she refused to recant statements put forth in her book *The Mirror of Simple Souls* about the nature of the merged soul which described it as virtually indistinguishable from God, such as when she claims, in a Middle English translation of the text, that the merged soul is, ‘pure, clarified, sche ne seep God ne hirsilf, but God/ seep þis of him, in hir, for hir, wiþouten hir, þat schewiþ hir þat þer is noon/ but he.’⁸¹ Thus in declarations such as this one, in which Porete appears to be erasing any distinction between the perception of God and that of the unified soul, she appears to be asserting that it is humanly possible, as Hollywood phrases Porete’s conclusions, to attain an ‘absolute union of the annihilated soul with the divine.’⁸² Evidence exists, interestingly enough, that some contemporary religious actually did equate the works of Porete and Julian—perhaps even specifically because of their extremely similar positions on the close connection between the divine and the human soul. An early fifteenth-century Carthusian manuscript—British Library MS Additional 37790—a compilation of fourteenth-century mystical works touching on union with the divine, includes both Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls* (although the Carthusians do not attribute it to Porete) and Julian’s ST.⁸³

⁸⁰ Nelstrop, Magill and Onishi, *Christian Mysticism*, pp. 209-10.

⁸¹ Marilyn Doiron, ed., ‘Margaret Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*: A Middle English Translation’, in *Archivio italiano per la storia della pieta*, vol. 5 (1968): 231-365, (p. 342).

⁸² Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 8.

⁸³ For more on BL MS Additional 37790 and the connections it implies between certain themes within the works of Julian of Norwich and Marguerite Porete, as well as in the texts of other mystics, such as Rolle and Jan van Ruysbroeck, see: Marleen Cré, ‘Women in the Charterhouse? Julian of Norwich’s *Revelations of Divine Love* and Marguerite Porete’s *Mirror of Simple Souls* in British Library MS Additional 37790’, in *Writing Religious Women: Female Spiritual and Textual Practices in Late Medieval England*, eds. Denis Renevey and Christiana

Whilst certainly radical, it was not altogether surprising that late-medieval mystical theologians, having already established a material connection between the created soul and the substance and intelligence that created it, would begin, as they did, to move, blur and eventually even start to dissolve the boundaries of separation between the soul and God. According to Mark McIntosh, the direction of these mystics' seeking and the logic it revealed to them led them finally and inexorably to 'argue that the distinction of the creaturely self is not an ontological distinction at all, that at its ground (as Eckhart says) the soul's being and God's being are one being.'⁸⁴ And whilst it was not, after all, illogical to take this step, as Eckhart and Porete did, from equating a substantial, created connection between the soul and God to positing a more seamless union that effectively merged human and divine consciousness and potentiality into one single entity, it was nonetheless, in its flouting of church doctrine, a very dangerous leap to make.

This was especially so, if one were to assert explicitly, as Eckhart did, that 'if a person could strip themselves of everything that individualised their self and realise their pure human nature, then they could become one with the Son. In this way the Son would be born with them and they would even *be* the Son.'⁸⁵ In this way—by stating that an indistinct union between mankind and divine was possible—Eckhart directly defied the orthodox position on the

Whitehead (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp. 43-62; and Marleen Cré, *Vernacular Mysticism in the Charterhouse : A Study Of London, British Library, MS Additional 37790* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

⁸⁴ Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), p. 83.

⁸⁵ Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn, eds, *Meister Eckhart: The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense* ((New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 208.

sacrosanct, inviolable status of the Incarnate and risen Christ, the sacred Lord whose unattainable perfection formed the central, ever-unreachable goal that helped to keep Christians always striving, in this life, towards something they could only hope to taste in the next.

So, clearly, from the evidence presented, as Beckwith reports, “The issue of the dividing line between a meditational exploration of “likeness” and deification or identity with God was at issue in the controversies over Eckhart’s writings, and Marguerite Porete, burnt for heresy in Paris.’⁸⁶ Yet, the question remains, did Julian’s works, like those of Eckhart’s and Porete’s, ever run the risk of straying into territory that may have equated the soul too closely with the power and identity of God? According to Turner, they may well have done so in the form of ‘some of Julian’s statements about our substance that by the standards of the later Middle Ages can seem to imply that between the soul and God there is, or can be a “formal identity”—a teaching that had in her own times come to be judged as heretical, at least in some forms.’⁸⁷ Nevertheless, although Julian’s findings about the soul’s equation with God may have flirted with the suggestion of the soul *as* God in a material way, as formed from divine substance, her writings always skirt any deeper issue of distinction and consciousness and thus manage never explicitly to claim for the soul the status of divine identification.

⁸⁶ Beckwith, *Christ’s Body*, p. 153.

⁸⁷ Turner, *Julian*, p. 175.

Tracing the Gaze to Its Source: The Indistinction between Seer and Seen

Having now offered evidence that Julian's writings show that her spiritual search led her to discover or situate the coveted God, or the sought entity which within Lacanian theory is known as the Thing, within her soul, and having illustrated that this discovery could have had some precedent in the period in which Julian lived and wrote, I would now like to take a look at this notion in light of the psychoanalytical thought of Lacan, specifically his formulation of subject as object, as elucidated through his discussion of the gaze.

As has been discussed above, Julian's insatiable desire for a quantity she identifies as God leads her to chase this quantity incessantly through a cyclical movement of guises pursued by a matching series of spiritual modes expressed in appropriate authorial voices, until it eventually draws her to an unexpected place—the human soul. Thus she discovers that the God she so desires, the source and goal of desire itself, the sought divinity resides within. Turner describes this process and its evolution as:

a strategy of self-retrieval or, more simply, it is the strategy of discovering what is really wanted. For what we most truly want is what we most really are, a seeking for what we already—from eternity—have, the God at once given and had, at once the source and goal of all our desiring. And so it is that Julian says: "I saw him and sought him, and I had him and wanted him."⁸⁸

So, after following her desire ceaselessly and relentlessly wherever it has chosen to lead her, through permutations both conventional and perverse,

⁸⁸ Turner, *Julian*, pp. 203-4.

Julian ironically or predictably finds that what she has truly been desiring has been emanating all along from within the human soul. The true, unadorned object of her deepest desire, her texts claim, actually lives within her as origin and culmination of both what she wants and who she defines herself to be—both God and soul in one shared place.

In the same way, Lacan's conception of human desire for the elusive Thing—a quantity that animates and entices the subject to chase it through a series of metonymic receptacles, labelled by him as *objet petit a*, always in search of the transgressive breakthrough into climactic and yet traumatic bouts of *jouissance* in the realm of the Real—inevitably involves a tracing back to the source of desire within, perhaps what he refers to as 'that ontological turning back.'⁸⁹ In this phenomenon, revealed clearly by what Lacan refers to as the gaze, one is able to recognise that the desired quantity, the Thing that has precipitated and defined so much of the subject's behaviour, emotions and identifications, is actually a product of the desire of the subject him- or herself.

Or, in another permutation of interpretation: the Thing (in the form of object *a*) represents the origin (as well as the perceived goal) of the subject's desire insofar as it is the exact embodiment of that which can restore wholeness to the lack at the heart of the subject. Thus the Thing is the impression of what is most wanting and is, in this way, the ontological essence of the subject itself. In this understanding, therefore, the subject *is* the object and the object *is* the subject, in much the same way that, in Julian's descriptions of her spiritual search and its findings, the soul is God and God is the soul. Of this relationship between subject and object, as well as the part that the gaze—

⁸⁹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 72.

or his conception that there is always something that we perceive to be looking at us, an ontological presence that both sees from our own perspective and yet perceives us simultaneously and maddeningly from a vantage point we can never hope to access—plays in revealing it, Lacan states:

the gaze operates in a certain descent, a descent of desire, no doubt... Modifying the formula I have of desire as unconscious—*man's desire is the desire of the Other*—I would say that it is a question of a sort of desire *on the part of the Other*, at the end of which is the *showing (le donner-à-voir)*.⁹⁰

Thus, whereas a human being's desire for the Thing can be readily read as longing for something outside of oneself, once one follows it, via the gaze, the look of desire, to its source, one discovers something entirely the opposite. In fact, tracing the gaze back to its source, according to Lacan in the above quotation, results in the 'showing', an epiphany which reveals that the subject's insatiable desire for the Thing actually emanates from the desired object, the Thing or the Other. This desire, therefore, that originates from the object or the Thing, also dwells within and emanates from the subject him- or herself since, as discussed above it represents the ideal realisation of that which can fill the ontological gap or lack within the desiring subject. Thus, by tracing the gaze, one finds that the subject, rather than, or in tandem with, the object, can be viewed as none other than the origin of desire itself.

Lacan justifies his arrival at this conclusion by constructing his concept of the gaze, at least in part, largely in terms of its pre-existence within the experience of each subject. Thus, in his discussion of the gaze, Lacan lays out

⁹⁰ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 115.

the case by saying that, for each human being, there is the sense that 'I apprehend the world in a perception that seems to concern the immanence of the *I see myself seeing myself*.'⁹¹ Innately, therefore, how one views or understands the phenomenological paradigm that comprises his or her world relies, according to Lacan, on this sense of watching oneself watch oneself, or a form of witness consciousness.

Once having accepted that there is something within one that sees oneself acting, reacting and ultimately seeing the seer, then it is a short logical step to suggest that this ontological seer not only witnesses one's life—and the desire that Lacan identifies as the driving force behind the impulses and behaviours of most subjects—but also creates it. After all, as Lacan himself says, 'How can one deny that nothing of the world appears to me except in my representations?'⁹² This is a concept that Joan Copjec explains and expands upon, in terms of her discussion of the gaze in relation to film theory, when she states:

Whether that which is represented is specularized as an image of the subject's own body or as the subject's image of someone or something else, what remains crucial is the attribution to the image of what Lacan... calls "that belongs to me aspect so reminiscent of property." It is this aspect that allows the subject to see in any representation not only a

⁹¹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 80-1.

⁹² Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 81.

reflection of itself but a reflection of itself as master of all it surveys.⁹³

So, one is not only seeing oneself see, but seeing oneself see that which one has manifested from one's own innermost desire for wholeness (in the form of the Thing), which results in the creation of a visual landscape of which one (or one's desire) is the ultimate originator, whether one is aware of it or not.

Because of the crucial role that desire—and its ultimate object, the Thing or that within which the Thing rests, *objet petit a*—plays in Lacan's formulation of the formation of what the subject perceives and thus how s/he views her- or himself, Žižek concludes that, 'For... Lacan, the object is precisely that which is "in the subject more than the subject itself", that which I fantasize that the Other (fascinated by me) sees in me.'⁹⁴ The object, or in other words that which is most desired by the subject—so the Thing in a Lacanian economy and God in Julian's writings—actually defines the subject completely as it represents the innermost, impulse towards completion within the human being or, in Julian's terminology, the soul.

For this reason, if one were to trace this desire back to its original source, the instigating Thing or the object *a* that best represents it in any given moment, through the medium of the gaze, one would necessarily find not the object in question, nor the Thing—or at least not solely any of these things—but the vital emanating source of the desire itself, the very essence of the subject or the soul perhaps mingled or merged with the object or the Thing, or in Julian's case, God. It is precisely because of this phenomenon that, according

⁹³ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, p. 21.

⁹⁴ Žižek, *Plague*, p. 10.

to Mills, 'the gaze is imagined as a subject, as an all-seeing, all-knowing subject, with whom the object of the gaze learns to identify and thus to gain a modicum of subjectivity.'⁹⁵ In other words, as Julian does when she follows her desire back to its source, when one tracks one's longing past all of the snares and receptacles within which it appears to rest, one can begin to attribute to it an almost transcendent power, perhaps due to its ability to anticipate and so perfectly embody that which one so exquisitely needs at the very root of one's psyche. It is perhaps this factor which leads Lacan to declare that, '*The objet a in the field of the visible is the gaze*,'⁹⁶ it is precisely that which one feels is looking at one and soliciting one's looks in return, ultimately defining how one sees oneself and the world around one. Inevitably, and unsurprisingly, the more one-pointedly one pursues the gaze to its source, this *objet a* or desired Thing, as Mills suggests, is the more that one begins to identify with it, as it so matches what one yearns to attain that it seems to be almost eliciting one's pursuit of it.

Therefore, at this juncture, it is possible to conclude that 'Lacan's subject is defined as a want-to-be; the gaze-as-object *a* is its being... since it is the cause of the subject's desire... [in the form of the] object, which condenses jouissance.'⁹⁷ Thus, by chasing the ultimate object of desire beyond all limits and across the borders of the Symbolic and Imaginary orders into the realm of the Real, the transgressive home of an extra-linguistic, unable-to-be-signified experience of blinding ecstasy or *jouissance*, the subject is not only attempting

⁹⁵ Mills, 'Troubled Looks', p. 126.

⁹⁶ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 105.

⁹⁷ Antonio Quinet, 'The Gaze as an Object', in *Reading Seminar XI: Lacan's Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jaanus (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 139-47 (p. 143).

to capture that which s/he most wants, but s/he is unavoidably, according to Lacanian theory, discovering or rediscovering whom s/he is at her very base, the place from which desire springs and not only begins to animate one, but inherently defines one.

This concept of Lacan's can help to shed light on a curious aspect in Julian's works. It can help to illumine why, according to Julian, after unceasingly chasing her desired Lord through various guises, from the bleeding, suffering Incarnation to a formless joy and from a universe of love concealed within a mysterious object the size of a hazelnut to resplendent God the traditional father in heaven, she eventually arrives at the conclusion that her desired beloved actually dwells (and yet must still be seemingly ceaselessly sought) within her very own soul. Indeed she states unequivocally that, after all her seeking and attempts to apprehend her desired divinity:

I saw that we have kindly of fulhed to desyer wisely and truly
know oure owne soule, wherby we be lerned to seke it ther it
is, and that is into God. And thus, by the gracious leding of the
holy gost, we shall know them both in one. Whether we be
stered to know God or oure soule, it is both good and trew
(*Revelation*, 56.5-9).

Thus, in this instance, Julian, who never relents in her pursuit of her desire, who chases her version of the Thing wherever it may lead, discovers that the desired God can actually be found within her own being, as her soul or at least a part of her soul, itself. Furthermore, Julian appears to be suggesting, with the words 'we be lerned to seke', that this recognition is the result of a search that she has been conducting, one that has now led her, through her prayers and through

following her longing for the beloved, to the realisation that she must seek God within her own soul or self.

Julian's equation of the soul as God can be better illuminated in light of Lacan's formulation of the gaze revealing the object and subject as the joint origin of desire. After all, having discovered that the object of her desire resides within her own soul, it only makes sense to conclude that Julian's desire for God (the Thing) is also, therefore, none other than God's (or the Thing's) desire for her or at least for her act of desiring, itself.

Tracing one's desire, therefore, back to its source, to the Thing or object *a* or, in Julian's case, God, through the medium of the gaze, one finds that the object is virtually interchangeable with and inseparable from the subject. Mills obliquely touches on this point, when in order to explain how the gaze instigates desire in the subject, he states:

Lacan's point is that the subject is a desiring being who hankers after an impossible real (impossible because beyond the field of imagery and signification, there is actually nothing); the fact that representation seems to gesture to something beyond itself—a gaze, a signified—is what causes a subject's desire, what, in short founds the subject.⁹⁸

In finding that that for which one so yearns actually stems from within one's own psyche or soul, apparently watching one and soliciting one's look in return, one can, with very little effort, conclude that there is an overlap between that which is sought and the seeker, seen and seer, object and subject, God and the soul.

⁹⁸ Mills, 'Troubled Looks', p. 130.

What makes this impression even more convincing for the subject, in some instances, is the belief or sense that the sought Thing, the desired object, in initiating the gaze, in looking at the subject who so longs for it, is actually soliciting the seeker's gaze in return. Of course, it is actually the power of the desire itself, in its raw form as a yearning for that which has been lost and will complete one only upon its return that, in a Lacanian formulation, gives the impression of an outer form or presence, an Other or a Thing, staring at one, inflaming one to stare back and attain ever greater heights of longing and desire. Yet, to a mystic such as Julian, certain that the desired beloved she seeks, or in her terms is being 'stered' towards, is truly a divine entity, it would only be logical to infer that the presence she feels responding to her search, the longed-for divinity that she suddenly finds within her own soul has actually been guiding her search, drawing her closer and closer, all along. Thus she is able to state of God's intention, ascertained in what she perceives to be his gaze: 'And ever he is to the soule in glad chere, loving and longing to bring us to his blisse' (*Revelation*, 51.101-2). Hence, Julian attributes the strength of her own inner desire for the Thing to an outer source, to the ulterior motive of a God whom she rightly perceives wants her to want him as much as she does and even more.

In this attribution of an ontological solicitation from the object of one's desire, from the mystical deity whom one so yearns to capture, Julian, once again shares much in common with Augustine. According to Turner, in his *Confessions*, Augustine is able, once he too has ascertained that the God he has sought for so long exists within his soul, to 'review the course of that restless seeking, with all its apparent aimlessness and randomness, and now see it not

as it had seemed to him at the time, to be the record of his seeking God, but as having been all along driven by the God of his seeking, working within the very seeking itself and not as if some object “outside” of himself.’⁹⁹ Ironically the very strength of the recognition that what he most longed for has all along emanated from within himself convinces Augustine (and Julian in her own right) of its transcendent, supernatural properties in that it represents the very ontological presence he has for so long imagined and coveted.

Whereas to Augustine and Julian, the discovery that their sought beloved resides within them in a pre-existent form confirms for them the certainty and validity of their belief that this coveted entity is indeed the eternal and transcendent deity of their deepest desire, to Lacan it merely signifies and confirms the power of desire as a creative force within the human psyche, its ability to construct the shape of the longed-for quantity, but more tellingly its capacity to invent and define the subject itself. Or as Copjec puts it, in Lacanian theory: ‘The subject is the effect of the impossibility of seeing what is lacking in the representation, what the subject, therefore, wants to see. The gaze, the object-cause of desire, is the object-cause of the subject of desire.’¹⁰⁰ Thus, that which the subject most longs to see, the manifested focus or form of her or his desire—*objet petit a* or the Thing—is precisely, according to Lacan’s conception, that which can never be seen by the subject, because it stems from and resides within her or his unconscious as that fundamental gap or lack occasioned by the individual’s entry into language, as well as appearing to beckon from the realm of the Real. Like the God that Julian finds in her soul,

⁹⁹ Turner, *Julian*, p. 139.

¹⁰⁰ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, pp. 35.

Lacan's desired Thing is also pre-existent within the desirer. As Žižek phrases it, for Lacan, '*objet petit a* [is]... the object of fantasy, is that "something in me more than myself on account of which I perceive myself."' ¹⁰¹ Thus, through the subject's own desire for something or some Thing that s/he thinks is external to her- or himself, s/he is not only defining her desired object, but also creating her or his own unique subjective identity and point-of-view.

For Julian, the finding of God within the soul serves to underline and shore up her faith in the eternal nature of the divine, and by association, the immortality of the soul, itself, the adjunct to the coveted and now apprehended (in some as yet incomplete fashion) divinity. That she has found what she longed to uncover and that it so exquisitely fits the image of what she desired, even to the point of casting a complementary reflection within her innermost soul, only convinces Julian further that she has discovered God within, an experience and reality that, by definition, is infinite and beyond the bounds of time.

Lacan draws a dissimilar conclusion from the similar recognition that the subject's innate desired Thing originates from inside the subject's own set of experiences and mental constructs. In fact, he states that, 'When carried to the limit, the process of this meditation, of this reflecting reflection, goes so far as to reduce the subject apprehended by the Cartesian meditation to a power of annihilation.' ¹⁰² Therefore, when the subject follows her or his founding desire for the Thing all the way back to its source and discovers that it resides or issues from within, according to Lacan (who nonetheless does not appear to

¹⁰¹ Žižek, *Plague*, p. 9.

¹⁰² Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 81.

ascribe to a Cartesian point-of-view in his formulation of the human psyche), far from feeling reassured that this means that she is part of a divine plan in which one is established as a soon-to-be re-integrated part of an eternal whole, this realisation results in the destruction of the Cartesian subject, that self-defined identity based upon the notion that one creates one's world and consciousness consciously and in a controlled fashion by being the sole initiator and master of one's thoughts. However, this recognition, whilst it may be unnerving, is, upon further reflection, not so very different to the mystic's destabilising realisation that, in order to truly apprehend the sought God, one has to be willing to radically and repeatedly surrender concepts, perspectives and even self-identifications, in order to keep up with the shifting guises of the coveted Lord, the desired Thing.

Instead of shoring up that Cartesian ideal of the self or subject, Lacan's concept of a subject that is essentially determined by unconscious forces and impulses actually manages to decentralise the power of the thinking subject and replace it with the hegemony of a being at the mercy of the world of signifiers, tempered by illusory individual imagination. This desiring subject which Lacan envisions can only ever briefly transcend her or his fragmented and destabilised state by accessing the desired Thing in momentary flashes of almost traumatic *jouissance*. The best that these temporary interludes can ever accomplish is briefly to catapult one into the Real without ever truly setting one free from the bondage imposed by the representations that both concretise and distort the desired Thing, which promises wholeness, yet falls short every time. It is for this reason that, when one follows the Lacanian gaze back to its source and finds an intimation of the desired Thing within, unlike in Julian's writings,

one never discovers even a hope of lasting union with the issuer of the gaze.

Rather, as Copjec elucidates:

This point at which something appears to be invisible, this point at which something appears to be missing from representation, some meaning left unrevealed, is the point of the Lacanian gaze. It marks the *absence* of the signified, it is an *unoccupiable* point... because it indicates an impossible real... one would expect to find at the point of the gaze a signified, but here the signifier is absent—and so is the subject. The subject, in short, cannot be located or locate itself at the point of the gaze, since this point marks, on the contrary, its very annihilation.¹⁰³

Essentially, in order to occupy that point from which the gaze emanates, that position as Thing, one would have to take up residence in the Real, a realm beyond signification, and thus, for Lacan, an impossible place. Therefore, to assume the identity of the Thing, in the way that Julian's soul begins to move towards tentative and largely undeclared unification with God, the Lacanian notion of the subject would have to remove itself from the chain of signifiers, thus cementing its ultimate, for all practical purposes to Lacan, ineradicable elision. Yet, despite this, Lacanian theory, as summed up in *Seminar VII*, appears to suggest that following one's radical desire for the Thing offers the subject the best, and perhaps only, chance to recoup some sense of the lost wholeness at the centre of his or her psyche. Even if that is, in the end, ultimately impossible, the very act of attempting to recuperate what is wanting represents, to Lacan, a

¹⁰³ Copjec, *Read My Desire*, pp. 34-5.

defiant, profane, perhaps suicidal, but somehow healthy step in the right direction for the individual and the society which currently is all too happy to choose pleasurable numbness and inertia over disruptive awareness and jolting, if pleasurable, *jouissance*.

That Julian, at any rate, appears to be benefiting and growing, as a result of her discovery of soul as God or subject as object—can be witnessed in the fact that, in her works, she projects at times a new understanding of or approach to discussing the nature of God, exemplified by a different tone and confidence as well as an expanded complex view of the divine desired. For instance, it can be argued that, even though she is repeating what God supposedly is saying to her, there is in Julian's unwavering assertion—part of a litany of divine self-declaration, offered in the first person representing the voice of the sought deity himself: "I it am that makith the to long. I it am, the endlesse fulfilling of all true desyers" (*Revelation*, 59.15-16)—a new, transcendent perspective on or even from the divine, akin to what Porete seems to have been advocating in the quotation cited above. Whilst clearly quoting the statements of God here, after previously denoting a connection between the soul and God, these words can attain a different flavour.

Similarly, in the following example of Augustine conducting an extended, musing interrogative conversation with the desired Lord which he has finally discovered within, it seems that he has arrived at the conclusion that listening to the God he has discovered in his soul is the only way that he could have (and can continue to) find and connect with his sought divine. He writes:

Where then did I find you to be able to learn of you? You were not already in my memory before I learnt of you. Where then did I

find you so that I could learn of you if not in the fact that you transcend me?... O truth, everywhere you preside over all who ask counsel of you... You reply clearly, but not all hear you clearly... Your best servant is the person who does not attend so much to hearing what he himself wants as to willing what he has heard from you.¹⁰⁴

This passage seems to present clear evidence to suggest that, having discovered what he credits as an aspect of the sought God within his own being, Augustine has come to believe that, 'he does not merely *see* the light of God in his soul, but also *enters* this light and *sees by it*.'¹⁰⁵ Thus, far from resulting in the annihilation of his identity as self or destroying her ability to communicate from the place of union that is shared within by the soul and God, the texts of Augustine and Julian display authorial points-of-view that are emboldened to speak of experiences of this union in voices and in a language of enlightenment borne of a belief in their own merging with the coveted divine.

Since in Lacan's parallel conception to the mystical soul as God, his formulation of subject as object, the assumption of the position of the Thing or the desire that forms and animates the subject from within as object *a*, would ultimately result in the erasure of the subject as a speaking, communicating entity, this sort of adoption of a transcendent voice or perspective would naturally never occur. For, as Lacan opines in regards to a mystic thinking that s/he has the ability to speak from the perspective of the divine, 'To confuse his contemplative eye with the eye with which God is looking at him must surely

¹⁰⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, p. 201.

¹⁰⁵ Nelstrop, Magill and Onishi, *Christian Mysticism*, p. 71.

partake of perverse *jouissance*.¹⁰⁶ The only way to speak from God's vantage point, the position of desire and desired from the realm of the Real, in other words, is to find a way to give voice to *jouissance*, a virtual, or at least a technical. impossibility to Lacan since this is a profoundly mute force, due to its irrevocably extra-linguistic status.

Yet, although Julian's belief that it is possible for the soul to inhabit (and perhaps in some way speak from) a shared sense of oneness with the God she has found to co-exist within its confines or at least make up its fabric does differ in this way from the Lacanian model of subject as object, her position nonetheless appears to agree fully with his conclusion that any experience of *jouissance* or unity resulting from such a discovery or realization would and could only be, at best fleeting. However, whereas Lacan's contention to this effect stems from his conviction that, as discussed above, any long term exposure to the realm of the Real, the place from which one's primordial desire arises and where it can be only briefly experienced as *jouissance*, would inevitably and unavoidably lead to the, for all practical purposes, eradication of the subject, since it would result in her or his removal from the world of signification, Julian's seeming resistance to the possibility of the permanent establishment of the soul in a co-existent position with God appears to originate largely in her adherence to the prevailing theological ideas¹⁰⁷ to that effect

¹⁰⁶ Jacques Lacan, 'God and the *Jouissance* of The Woman', in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the Ecole Freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (New York: Norton, 1982), pp. 137-148, (p. 147).

¹⁰⁷ According to orthodox spiritual doctrine at this time, mystical union with God whilst in a mortal body could only be fleeting. Lasting oneness could only be attained in heaven. Walter Hilton adheres to this position when he states, 'Reforming in fullness [his version (an original one) of the unitive state] cannot

which predominated in her late-medieval era and which will be laid out more fully in the passages to follow.

Thus, unlike, as Mills phrases it, ‘Lacan’s supposition that apprehensions of the gaze would be traumatic, in that to encounter the Other in its radical nothingness is to experience dissolution,’¹⁰⁸ Julian’s unwillingness to countenance an established union of soul and God seems more attributable to her adherence to church doctrine. As Turner states of Julian’s—and Dante’s (in the early fourteenth century)—fealty to the prevailing dogmatic position on the ability to attain more than (if even that) a fleeting intimation of divine happiness in this life, ‘the theology of the *Commedia* and the theology of *Revelation* represent a common eschatology; a common conviction that the story of salvation can be told only *in part*, exceeding our pre-mortem comprehension.’¹⁰⁹ For this reason, no matter how ecstatic her self-described experience of the soul’s co-existence in and with God might be, Julian’s writings always clearly reiterate the impossibility of such an experience becoming fully established in this lifetime or even persisting beyond a very temporal period with a preset, if unknown, expiration date. An example of this occurs in her assertion that:

We may have knowing of oureselfe in this life by continuant
helpe and vertu of oure high kind, in which knowing we may
encrese and wax by forthering and speding of mercy and
grace. But we may never fulle knowe ourselfe into the last

be had in this life, but it is postponed after this life to the glory of heaven.’
Hilton, *Scale*, p. 198.

¹⁰⁸ Mills, ‘Troubled Looks’, p. 131.

¹⁰⁹ Turner, *Julian*, p. 110.

point, in which pointe this passing life and alle manner of wo
and paine shalle have an ende (*Revelation*, 46.5-9).

Thus, whilst a very near approach to the state or experience of divine ecstasy might be attainable in this life, especially through discovering God within the soul, through the grace of the desired beloved, still a fuller approximation of such union remains, in Julian's stated estimation, utterly out of reach.

To have asserted or even entertained any ideas about the possible permanence of such a state or union would have placed Julian within the perhaps questionable company of those who chose to skirt or entirely leave the bounds of accepted church teachings on the matter. For example, according to Hollywood, 'the claim that the soul can be uncreated, free, and without suffering in this life, will occur in the work of Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart.'¹¹⁰ Whether from a genuine adherence to orthodox position or a wariness about possibly offending church authorities, the truth of which will likely never be ascertainable, Julian chose, in her writings, to state that any complete union of soul and God would have to wait until after death when the soul can at last ascend to Paradise. As Jantzen puts it, Julian believes that all that is attainable here is 'that kindergarten ABC variety of real communion with [God] which is the preliminary to fullness of knowledge which she believes awaits us when we see him face to face.'¹¹¹ It is just such a belief system which

¹¹⁰ Amy Hollywood, 'Inside Out: Beatrice of Nazareth and Her Hagiographer', in *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters*, ed. Catherine M. Mooney (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1999), pp. 78-98, (pp. 94-5). This claim is simply another way of asserting the dangerous and perhaps even heretical position that, whilst still encased in a living body, the human soul and God share an undifferentiated union. This is because only God, according to the Church, could be uncreated, free and without suffering.

¹¹¹ Jantzen, *Mystic and Theologian*, p. 94.

leads Turner to remark that ‘Contemplatives like Julian saw themselves as poised on an eschatological cusp formed by the convergence of the “now” of time and the “not yet” of eternity.’¹¹² Though she may have touched a corner of eternity, Julian still claimed to find it ultimately unattainable, at least as long as the soul remained encased in the human body.

Curiously, centuries later, based on very similar explorations and findings (although parsed through exceedingly dissimilar value systems and philosophical underpinnings), Lacan also discovers a taste of transformative bliss accessible within, an experience that he too labels as timeless (in the fleeting, blinding moments in which *jouissance* freezes those who experience it). Also, like Julian, Lacan concludes that this *jouissance*, this merging with the origin and goal of desire itself, has no possibility of enduring. This is, due to Lacan’s understanding that an afterlife is unthinkable—a conclusion which would necessarily, from Julian’s medieval Christian point-of-view, prevent any chance of ultimate union with the desired Thing, her coveted God. Julian’s belief system, on the other hand, does offer a deferred hope of a lasting bliss beyond compare in which, as her depiction of the temporary intimations of God in the soul indicates and as her description of ascending to God seems to suggest, desire may finally be fulfilled in a blaze of ecstatic, undying and unabated oneness with the yearned-for God, or in Lacanian terms, the desired Thing.

Julian’s determination, stated and implicit throughout her texts, to follow this desire and the God it purports to chase into and past the bounds of death itself will form the basis of the forthcoming chapter which will look at her insatiable yearning for her divine beloved and her commitment to follow it

¹¹² Turner, *Julian*, p. 147.

no matter where it might lead, through the prism of Lacan's conception of the two deaths.

Chapter Three: The ‘Space between Two Deaths’

Death is everywhere in the texts of Julian of Norwich. In fact mortality marks the starting point of her entire narration. In this chapter, therefore, I will examine the preoccupation with the subject of death in Julian’s works, especially the role that different forms and degrees of physical and spiritual or symbolic expiration play, not only in the precipitation and unfolding of her visions, but also in the possible mindset and motivation of Julian herself that these texts reveal, as she appears actively to risk physical extinction in furtherance of her desire for God. I will also attempt, as I have done in the preceding chapters, to shine further light on Julian’s thought and conclusions, in this case in relation to her treatment of death, as manifested in her writings, by looking at them from the perspective offered by certain Lacanian psychoanalytical precepts.

Julian’s Textual Conceptions of Mortality in Light of Lacanian Theory

That Julian’s texts are inextricably bound up with the idea and the near reality of death is difficult to dispute. After all, she begins both of her accounts of her self-described visionary experiences with the reminiscence that, in her younger years, some indeterminate amount of time prior to that in which the events of her books are said to take place, she fervently prayed for ‘thre giftes by the grace of God’ (*Revelation*, 2.3). The second of this trio of solicitations sought from God, Julian informs her readers, involved, ‘a wilful desire to have of Gods gifte a bodily sicknes’ (*Revelation*, 2.17-18). What Julian is actually asking her divine beloved for here is far more than just a mere bout with illness as a

painful yet far from fatal means of signalling her affinity with the sufferings of Christ as he languished on the cross. In what she herself refers to, somewhat contritely, as 'not the commune use of prayer' (*Revelation*, 2.29), Julian's request for an illness actually proclaims her willingness, her eagerness even, to die for her desire to get as close to her coveted Lord as possible. Elucidating on this second prayer, Julian states:

I would that that sicknes were so hard as to the death, that I
might in that sicknes undertake all my rightes of holy church,
myselfe wening that I should die, and that all creatures might
suppose the same that saw me (*Revelation*, 2.17-21).

The stark seriousness of what Julian is actually asking God to grant her in this petition cannot be overestimated. Bluntly and unmistakably, Julian is, at the very least, requesting an experience of some form of death, if not the actual irrevocable state of, biological expiration.

Characteristically, Julian was willing to go to this or any length, in the cause of attaining her desire for God, a yearning that I have, throughout this thesis, been equating with Lacan's concept of desire for the Thing or *Das Ding*. Whilst Julian may have had some misgivings, as she alluded to in the above quotation, about the orthodoxy of the somewhat extreme nature of this wish, which, as Sutherland explains, 'is without exact contemporary parallel, in its emphasis on physical mortification,'¹ nonetheless, many critics would probably agree that 'it does not sound entirely out of keeping with the trends of contemporary spirituality.'² Thus, although the intensity of Julian's desire for

¹ Sutherland, 'Liturgy', p. 88.

² Sutherland, 'Liturgy', p. 88.

closeness with her desired beloved may have rendered her prayer rather more graphic and drastic in its potential consequences than the norm, it still fits within the outer bounds of conventional, late-medieval devotional practice.

Having introduced the notion of her willingness to expire for her longing for God, Julian goes on to narrate that, years later, that which she had prayed for in her younger years actually came to pass. As she tells it, 'when I was thirty yere old and a halfe, God sent me a bodily sicknes in the which I ley three days and three nightes, and on the fourth night I toke all my rightes of holy church, and wened not to have liven till day' (*Revelation*, 3.1-3). From the circumstances described in this passage, which Julian explicitly equates with her earlier prayer for a serious, even fatal, illness, it seems clear that what she had once only envisioned as an extreme length to which she was willing, and perhaps even eager, to go in order to approach closer the object of her desire had all of a sudden become an all-too-tangible reality. Once having progressed to this point, however, Julian is not quite as certain about dying for devotion as she originally might have been when she made her youthful prayer, something she makes clear when she states, 'I felt a great louthsomnes to die' (*Revelation*, 3.5-7). However, this resistance to death, Julian goes on to clarify, stems more from a longing to love God more in this life, than it does from any other motive, such as fear of pain or loss of future opportunities (*Revelation*, 3.6-8). Tellingly Julian does not retract her initial prayer. So whilst she might momentarily have wavered in her conviction, Julian nevertheless forges ahead where her beloved Lord leads her.

The fact that this affliction had progressed to the point where last rites were administered offers a clear indication that, at least in the eyes of the people around her, Julian was at the very doorstep of her own physical mortality. In fact, Watson and Jenkins point out, 'the last rites included a final confession, absolution, and extreme unction (anointment of the dying person with holy oil), essential preparations for making a good death.'³ And Paul Binski points out that, 'Anointing was the most final ritual statement: the anointing or unction of the dying (like that of a king at a coronation) was a ritually transformative act from which there was no return.'⁴ Therefore, it would have been highly unlikely that Julian would have received such extreme measures unless she was considered to have been on the very verge of death itself. Certainly Julian, as the narrator, makes it clear that ritually she considered herself to have been taken over the border of life and into the realm of the dying and soon-to-be-dead.

Furthermore, aside from the priest believing that she was about to expire, Julian informs us that her own mother, at one point, actually thinks that her daughter has died. So convinced is Julian's mother of the fact that her daughter's death has occurred, that she reaches over to close her eyes, in a gesture that, still to this day, is customarily performed with the recently dead. As Julian expresses it: 'My modere, that stode emanges othere and behelde me, lifted uppe hir hande before me face to lokke min eyen. For she wened I had bene dede or els I hadde diede' (*Vision*, 10.26-8).

³ Watson and Jenkins, *Revelation*, p. 126.

⁴ Paul Binski, *Medieval Death: Ritual and Representation* (London: The British Museum Press, 1996), p. 29.

Thus, it seems, Julian's youthful expressed desire to apprehend her sought God in whatever fashion that might require, even following him imaginatively and physically past the limits of life itself, ended up, according to the evidence offered in her texts, bringing her right to the very precipice of physical extinction. This marks one exhibit of a preoccupation with death, and especially death as a means to draw nearer to her sought desire, in Julian's works.

However, to find yet more evidence of the vital role that death plays in Julian's texts, one does not need to look much further. Because, almost immediately after imparting the details of her own impending departure from the physical realm, Julian pivots to describing the manner in which she approached this looming exit—by placing her focus squarely upon a crucifix, the most recognizable and potent symbol of physical death in medieval times. As Julian, herself, relates the sequence of events leading up to what she believes to be her last breaths:

My curate was sent for to be at my ending, and by then he cam I had set up my eyen and might not speake. He set the crosse before my face, and said: 'I have brought thee the image of thy saviour. Looke thereupon and comfort thee therewith.' Methought I was well, for my eyen were set uprightward into heaven, where I trusted to come by the mercy of God. But nevertheles I ascended to set my eyen in the face of the crucifixe, if I mighte, and so I dide
(*Revelation*, 3.17-23).

Therefore, in order best to meet what she can only assume will be the end of her physical existence, Julian tells the reader that, when presented with a choice either to gaze at heaven where she aspires to end up or to fixate upon the image of another person, albeit the incarnate Lord, facing imminent death, the representation of one form of her desired God (or Thing in Lacanian parlance) suffering and ultimately dying on the cross, she opts to greet mortality by focusing on Christ's Passion.

Julian's decision to do this was in no way idiosyncratic, far from it in fact. Indeed this was a somewhat accepted, if not common, practice for those in the late Middle Ages who were confronting their own deaths. As Christopher Daniell relates of the usual death procedure at this time, 'In the vast majority of cases a priest would have been present at the death. On arrival the priest started the *Ordo Visitandi*, which began with the gesture of holding the crucifix before the dying person.'⁵ Eamon Duffy also attests to the commonality of this practice, when he states, 'at the very outset of the *Ordo Visitandi*... the priest was directed to hold up before the face of the dying person the image of the Crucifix.'⁶ Thus clearly, as Binski says, the representation of Christ on the cross, was during this era meant 'to be a central icon of contemplation in the vision of the dying.'⁷ Duffy even connects this practice of staring at the cross at the time of death with Julian's own narrative and her entry into her visionary experience, when he states that her fixation on the crucifix, 'provided the trigger for the most remarkable theological achievement of the English late

⁵ Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 35-6.

⁶ Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c. 1400-c. 1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 314.

⁷ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 40.

Middle Ages, the “showings” of Julian of Norwich.’⁸ It seems safe to assert, therefore, that Julian would have most likely been very aware of the tradition of staring at a crucifix and ruminating upon Christ’s expiration as a proper means to approach one’s own death.

Nevertheless, as Julian herself declares in her texts, she was initially torn between staring heavenwards as a means to effect a movement towards God at the moment of her death and contemplating the crucifix proffered before her. After a slight hesitation, however, Julian, based on the evidence offered throughout the first third of her texts wherein she continues to focus on Christ’s Passion as a means of accessing and interacting with her visions, chooses to gaze and ruminate upon an image of death, even as she moves inexorably, in her opinion, towards her own extinction.

As she herself has indicated by the sequencing of her narration, Julian has arrived at just such an extreme point, poised on the very brink of biological death, due to her own fervently expressed desire to know and experience the object of her one-pointed desire—her God—through the medium of an illness so serious that it threatens her life. That she has done so in this manner, as mentioned above, was not wholly outside of the traditional devotional practice of *imitatio Christi*. Yet, in keeping with the particular intensity of Julian’s incessant and unwavering desire (which tracks very closely with Lacan’s concept of desire for the Thing), in her case she has willed—for that is the conclusion that her texts encourage us to draw—a version of sickness so acute that it promises to take her past the limits of traditional affinity with Christ’s suffering and into and beyond the very limit of mortality itself from which only

⁸ Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, p. 314.

he, having transgressed it, has returned. Having proven herself willing to go to this level of sacrifice in pursuit of her desire, it would not seem too surprising to note that, at this juncture, Julian appears to choose, even in extremis, to proceed, after expressing, as I noted above, some momentary trepidation and doubt, even further afield than her original prayer and the desire behind it suggested and continue to follow the object of her yearning, the manifestation of the Thing that inspired her prayer in the first place—the suffering Incarnation itself—past all boundaries and into the very land of death and beyond. Her decision obsessively to fix her eyes upon the cross effectively signals this choice.

This decision immediately pays off for Julian. Because, as soon as she chooses this course of action, her pain disappears and she enters a state that presages the reception of something else, which will turn out to be her showings. This new state, however, does not in any way forestall the imminence of her demise. As Julian herself describes this change:

sodenly all my paine was taken from me and I was as hole, and
namely in the over parte of my body, as ever I was befor. I
merveyled of this sodeyn change, for methought that it was a
prevy working of God, and not of kind. And yet by the feeling of
this ease I trusted never the more to have lived (*Revelation*,
3.30-34).

Why has this easing of her pain occurred? According to Julian, it is attributed to an enigmatic act that God, her coveted Lord, has wrought, ‘a prevy working of God,’ rather than the effect of natural causes intervening in her condition, hence, ‘not of kind.’

However, a mystery still persists: what would have inspired God, at this particular point, to have removed her pain? Julian appears to believe she has the answer to this intimated, yet unasked question, which she puts forth when she states, a few lines later in her text, 'Then cam sodenly to my mind that I should desire the second wound of our lordes gift and of his grace: that my body might be fulfilled with mind and feeling of his blessed passion, as I had before prayed' (*Revelation*, 3.36-38). Thus, Julian seems to suggest, from the words she offers here, that, at this point, her pain has been curtailed (though not her body's march towards death), in order that she actively and better contemplate the Passion, the dying throes, of her beloved Christ, by calling upon the memory of another prayer offered in her youth (along with her entreaty for a deathly illness), and by continuing to gaze at the image of the Passion, which she had just chosen to focus upon immediately prior to this respite in her anguish.

It would seem from the progression of these events that Julian—whose supposedly imminent extinction has been brought about by a youthful request for an experience intended to bring her closer to her desired goal, closeness to God—having chosen to continue following a representation of that object of desire, the crucifix, beyond the threshold of life, is now being rewarded for the persistence of her desire by being prompted to continue along this path even further, towards her and Christ's deaths. Effectively, due to the unswerving focus of her desire for God and her unwillingness to relinquish it, even in the face of physical expiration, Julian appears to be telling the reader, she has evoked the very presence of her Lord. Furthermore, the Lord has entered into a dialogue with her, by bringing to her awareness the thought that she call upon

her youthful prayer for mind of the Passion. This internal conversation with the divine ultimately spurs her on to still greater levels of sacrifice and surrender.

The advisability of the course of action, seemingly advocated by her divine desired, seems to be confirmed by events in her narrative. Directly after receiving this inner prompting and inwardly assenting to its demand, Julian enters into her first vision—the red blood begins to trickle down Jesus’ forehead (*Revelation*, 4.1) on the very crucifix she has agreed to gaze upon and follow into her own death. That her showings stem from this choice on Julian’s part to focus upon the cross and its message and imaginatively to emulate the experience of a dying man who represents an incarnate form of her sought beloved, appears undeniable. As Gillespie and Ross state, ‘her delivery into the first showing comes not from a vague imageless gazing in the direction of heaven, but by an intense focussing of her waning powers on an earthly image of the suffering Christ.’⁹ Rather than turning away from mortality and the limit of extinction, when it comes to the moment of truth, Julian opts to follow her beloved all the way to the end, past even the boundary of life itself.

That this decision results in Julian’s entry into her visionary experiences simply signals that she has made the right choice in terms of pursuing her desire. Her action, her intention, her willingness to give up everything has, it seems, directly resulted in the reception of her showings, arguably an act of reward and reciprocation on the part of her coveted God for the strength of her solicitous desire or devotion.

Watson and Jenkins explain that the option Julian chooses—to focus on a crucifix as she feels herself approaching bodily extinction—was far from

⁹ Gillespie and Ross, ‘Apophatic Image’, p. 60.

unprecedented. They cite the example of the late-twelfth-century monk, Adam of Eynsham, who also gazed upon a wooden cross at the critical point of an illness that almost led to death. Similarly to Julian's case, this action also resulted in a mystical, visionary encounter with the divine. They state, 'the association between sickness and revelation was well established in the visionary tradition. After a long illness, the Monk of Eynsham's visions take place in a state of rapture,'¹⁰ as he suffers and a crucifix bleeds in his abbey church. Indeed, Adam of Eynsham follows a trek towards death almost uncannily similar to Julian's in certain details. Just as in Julian's case, after having had last rites¹¹ administered and appearing to be near death and insensible¹² Adam somehow manages to get to the altar of the church in front of the crucifix, where he is found the next morning even closer to death. Adam, like Julian, also manages to evade death and recover. The events that occurred in front of the cross in the chapel bear striking corollaries to Julian's near-death experience and the entry they precipitated into her visionary showings. Adam recalls:

as Y lift vppe my nyes, that were sore of weping to the face of
the crucifyxe, Y felte some dropys falling don to me. I putt
ether-to my fyngerys and Y wele perceyued and knewe by the
rednes that hit was blode.¹³

¹⁰ Watson and Jenkins, *Revelation*, p. 129.

¹¹ Adam of Eynsham, *The Revelation of the Monk of Eynsham* ed. Robert Easting (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 15. Whilst the original *Visio monachi de Eynsham* dates to 1196, it was translated into Middle English closer to Julian's day.

¹² Eynsham, *Monk of Eynsham*, p. 17.

¹³ Eynsham, *Monk of Eynsham*, p. 33.

Thus, just as with Julian, a near-death experience leads a seeker to gaze fixedly at a crucifix, which then begins to bleed and leads him into a series of visions.

So, in Julian's time there was at least one parallel for this sort of phenomenon.¹⁴

Yet, in her description of her own experience as related in her writings, Julian makes no explicit reference to any such corollary or similar cases, nor attempts to situate or justify her reception of her showings by associating them with those received by other visionaries who confronted biological extinction. Instead she treats her entry into these visions as something wholly unexpected and singular.

What Julian clearly does attempt to convey, in the way that she describes her crossing into her showings, almost as a consequence of her surrendering to death by agreeing to focus exclusively on the crucifix and on the journey into death it represents, is that these visions not only signal a response from or communication with her desired entity, but they actually signify a whole new state of perception that has been bestowed upon her. Having agreed to surrender her life entirely in pursuit of her coveted God, Julian believes herself to have passed into another level of existence altogether—a plane that allows her not only to see and feel and taste the visions sent by her desired Thing, but also to be able to receive them on a wholly different stratus of understanding and awareness, one she would not have been capable of had she not signalled her intention to forfeit her life and chase her desire beyond its boundaries if necessary. Later on in this chapter, I will present the argument that this new state of receptivity and understanding which Julian appears to imply that she

¹⁴ Again, even though the original *Visio monachi de Eynshami*, written in Latin, dates to 1196, the Middle English translation appears closer to Julian's late-medieval period.

has attained, shares many characteristics with Lacan's formulation of what he refers to as the 'space between two deaths.'

For the present, though, I would like to offer evidence from the critical field to back up the contention that Julian seems to be intimating that she is able both to receive and truly assimilate her visions due to the dual consequences of being in a near-death condition and more importantly surrendering her will to this impending expiration in order to pursue her desire wherever it may lead. It is just this phenomenon which I believe McAvoy is discussing when she describes Julian's physical and emotional state as she enters her visions, stating:

she is *not*, merely paralysed bodily by illness and transfixed psychologically by the vision of Christ, which... is unfolding before her own gaze... Julian is also leaving her increasingly abject body behind in the sickroom with the onlookers—and her readers—whilst entering a parallel and palimpsestic mystical space. She is quite literally there and not there, and it is the convoluted doubleness of this inside-outside perception of the body, along with the fixedness of her own gaze, which not only allows for her remarkably nuanced response to her own visions but which becomes, in her revised text, fundamental to the forging of a suitable poetics for their understanding and articulation.¹⁵

¹⁵ Liz Herbert McAvoy, *Medieval Anchoritisms: Gender, Space and the Solitary Life* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), p. 120.

McAvoy seems to be agreeing with the notion that Julian's surrender to death—in the form of her own illness, as well as in her decision to mirror Christ's Passion whilst focussing on a crucifix—has brought her into an altered state of sorts, one that not only enables her to open to the showings bestowed upon her by her desired Lord, but also gives her the ability better to understand and later devise a profound fashion in which to communicate and explicate them.

Abbott also appears to concur with this line of thinking when he writes of Julian's reception of her visions, as she describes her approach to physical extinction, as follows:

The illness is presented as the instrument of a transformation of perception, preparing Julian to rise to a higher plane of cognition, and so it signifies a kind of dying in respect of an exclusively mundane level of consciousness rather than actual physical dying. The sudden recovery effected through what she understands to be 'a privy workeing of God and not of kinde' (3.5) does not simply restore her to a previous state of bodily health but marks the successful completion of a rite of passage into a visionary state.¹⁶

In this quotation, Abbott equates Julian's portrayal of her approach to death and entry into her visions with a sort of expiration of a level of spiritual ignorance or denseness which can only be remedied by passing across a threshold of death, or perhaps surmounting the obstacle of resistance to death and replacing it with a willingness to die in pursuit of one's desired God.

¹⁶ Abbott, *Autobiography and Theology*, p. 20.

This is a sacrifice that Julian herself has gone to great pains to illustrate she was prepared for and, when the time arrived, after an initial impulse to balk had passed, even eager to make. Not surprisingly, the texts inform the reader, her extreme surrender in the name of chasing her desire wherever it may lead, even into the realm of death itself, has rewarded her with visions that bring her ever closer to the object of her transgressive and unrelenting desire, the God that, in one version of his multiple manifestations, had himself willingly entered death and triumphed over it.

Julian's Willingness to Follow Her Desire beyond Two Forms of Death

I would now like to take a look at Julian's self-described near-encounter with biological death, and the role she ascribes to it in her writings, in light of certain formulations of Lacan's psychoanalytical theory. Specifically I will examine how death in Julian's works act as a doorway, albeit a terrifying and painful one, into the visionary experiences which both serve as an initial answer to her fervent desire for God and as an unfolding means of drawing ever closer to her beloved, in the form of material to be contemplated and meditated upon over the ensuing years of her incessant search for her desired ever-shifting object, which is akin to Lacan's concept of the Thing.

From a purely practical angle, quite starkly and simply, Lacanian thought would have found no merit whatsoever in Julian actually following through on her willingness to sacrifice her life in order to gain greater access to her desire. This is because, to Lacan and other philosophers in a post-Hegelian world, physical death can never facilitate anything—be it an entry into another plane of existence, such as heaven or hell, or access to greater levels of

awareness or understanding, such as seemingly suggested in Julian's texts—since biological death is irrevocably terminal.

In this, Lacan subscribes wholeheartedly to Hegel's opinion of mortality, which he speaks of as 'the death that is without meaning, the sheer terror of the negative that contains nothing positive, nothing that fills it with content.'¹⁷ As this quotation from Hegel makes clear, for Lacan, there is nothing that awaits one after the body has expired. Once death has occurred the individual human experience fully and abruptly ceases to exist. Therefore, it is appropriate to conclude, as Gilbert does, that

Lacan challenges at base the contention that death—
whatever, if any significance be granted to it—gives meaning
to life. Death, for Lacan is meaningless, and the view that it
renders life meaningful is a defensive reaction formation to
this glimpse of the void.¹⁸

Therefore, to Lacan, Julian's premise that her actual surrender to her own mortality would in any way advance her cause of approaching closer to her chosen deity or his notion of the desired Thing for that matter, would have been completely unrealistic at best and self-deluding at worst.

However, as will be discussed in greater depth further on in this chapter, there is one aspect to Julian's approach to her biological death which would have made perfect sense when seen through the lens of Lacanian thought. This involves her unrelenting determination to follow her desire for her sought

¹⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, with analysis by J.N. Findlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 362.

¹⁸ Gilbert, *Living Death*, pp. 19-20.

quantity wherever it may lead her, even if that might happen to take her beyond all reasonable bounds and into the very realm of death itself.

Returning to Julian's treatment of mortality in her texts—having traversed the limits of physical death in search of her desired beloved and received her showings, as her works suggest, in reward for such determination and commitment to her yearning, Julian does not die. Also, once she has received these visions over the course of one night in the throes of near death, Julian both recovers from her illness and receives no further communications from her coveted God. The channel that she appears to suggest has presumably been opened up, at least in part, due to her fearless willingness to follow Christ's example into the jaws of physical extinction itself, abruptly and—based on the evidence of time elapsed provided by her texts which span a twenty-year distance between them—permanently closes.

Thus, having risked everything to draw closer to her desired quantity, at the end of her deathbed experience, Julian survives, managing to escape with her life, barely, as well as sixteen revelations filled with as many enigmatic elements as elucidating ones. Despite receiving these visions, replete with messages from God in the form of sights, sounds, tastes, touches and words that come to her directly from her beloved, it appears that Julian's desire was not slaked in the least. Indeed from the evidence provided in Julian's two extant texts, she was not at all content simply to revel in the fact that God had appeared to her. Instead, she chose to take the information imparted in these showings and continue over the remaining years of her life, or at least the next two decades, a timeframe she claims had elapsed between her first version of her work and her second, to explore it, contemplate it and excavate it in an

ongoing, relentless focus on attaining a closer and closer apprehension of her desired God. Indeed, as Miles declares, 'Her divine visions, beginning with the core experience of May 1373, became their own experiential world which could be returned to in her mind and by means of her written accounts over the next forty-odd years.'¹⁹ One way in which Julian, perhaps, facilitated her repeated meditative returns to her visionary revelations could have involved traversing yet another threshold of mortality. Only this time the boundary she opted to cross in pursuit of her coveted Lord was that of a symbolic death as represented by her enclosure as an anchorite.

Whilst very little, in fact next to nothing,²⁰ is known about the historical person who produced the two texts which are being examined in this thesis, there has been much speculation and scholarly debate about what register of life Julian might have belonged to at the time that she found herself on her deathbed receiving last unction and accepting a series of spiritual visions. The theories about Julian's life up to this seminal point place her as alternatively a nun at Carrow and a wife and mother, with variations in between these two extremes of the spectrum.²¹ Realistically, however, due to the scarcity of information available as relates to Julian's biological existence—her texts do us no favours in this regard—it is unlikely that anyone will ever be able to do more than speculate about who this woman actually was and what role she played in life at the time that she received her near-deathbed visions.

¹⁹ Miles, 'Space and Enclosure', p. 154.

²⁰ For more on this, in addition to earlier references on the topic provided in previous chapters, see, for instance: Jones, 'Anchoritic Aspects', p. 75.

²¹ For various discussions about Julian's possible positions in life at the time she received her visions, see: Jantzen, *Mystic and Theologian*, pp. 18-19; Jones, 'Anchoritic Aspects', p. 77; and Watson and Jenkins, *Writings of Julian*, p. 4.

Yet, whilst still inconclusive, there exists considerably more evidence to support the scholarly consensus of what happened next in the biological continuum of the life of the author who is commonly known as Julian of Norwich. From all the evidence available, it has been accepted that some time following her reception of her sixteen showings, Julian became enclosed as an anchorite at Norwich. Watson and Jenkins sum up the case for this contention as follows:

That Julian had decided on the... life of the anchorite
sometime before she was fifty we know, not only from the
opening rubric of *A Vision* and the closing rubric of *A
Revelation* (which refer to her respectively as “recluse” and as
“anacorage” of Norwich) but from the evidence of surviving
wills, which record several bequests made to her between
1393/94 and 1416.²²

A final piece of purported proof, in addition to the ones listed above, involves the visit that Margery Kempe describes, in her contemporary, self-titled autobiographical book, as making in 1413 to ‘Dame Jelyan’ whom she designates as ‘an ankres.’²³ Therefore, from the documentation available, most critics agree that the writer of these texts was enclosed as an anchorite at the church of St. Julian’s in Norwich at some point after the events of her illness and

²² Watson and Jenkins, *Writings of Julian*, p. 5. For more on this, see also: Jones, ‘Anchoritic Aspects’, p. 75 and Liz Herbert McAvoy, “‘And thou to whom this Booke Shall Come’: Julian of Norwich and her Audience, Past, Present and Future”, in *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden and Roger Ellis (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), pp.101-13 (p. 101).

²³ Barry Windeatt, ed., *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), p. 119.

the subsequent reception of the visionary experiences portrayed in her works. In fact, so accepted is it within Julian criticism that she was an anchorite, that Alexandra Barratt speculates of a passage in Julian's text: 'Julian of Norwich writes of her anchorhold (though it is also possible that she is simply referring to this earthly life), "This place is prison and this life is penance."'”²⁴ This certainly assumes a great degree of certainty or at least acceptance that Julian actually was an anchorite, so much so that Barratt is suggesting that she incorporated the details of her anchoritic life into her works.

The significance of Julian's enclosure as an anchorite, for the purposes of this chapter and thesis, lies in the fact that anchoritism demanded of its adherents that they assume the symbolic, and in some senses practical, position of one who is dead, whilst remaining alive. McAvoy describes the salient details of the anchoritic vocation as follows:

the medieval anchorite [was]—a woman or a man, but more often a woman, who had opted for permanent solitary enclosure, usually in a small, purpose-built cell attached to a monastic institution or, more likely, a local parish church... In this cell, following a formal rite of enclosure closely resembling the funereal rite, the recluse would be locked up to spend a life praying, meditating and mediating between

²⁴ Alexandra Barratt, 'Context: Some Reflections on Wombs and Tombs and Inclusive Language', in *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp. 27-38 (p. 35). Also see comments such as: 'Julian of Norwich was of course an anchorite.' E.A. Jones, 'Hermits and Anchorites in Historical Context' in *Approaching Medieval English Anchoritic and Mystical Texts*, ed. Dee Dyas, Valerie Edden and Roger Ellis (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2005), pp. 3-18 (p. 3).

humanity and its God, veiled from the world behind a small window and dark curtain.²⁵

Therefore, one who chose, as Julian did, to become an anchorite in the late Middle Ages theoretically was opting to remove her- or himself so completely from society, presumably in order to focus on her or his devotional worship of God, that s/he was considered literally dead to the world. So much so that the enclosure ceremony performed by the Church included prayers for the dead and last rites, such as were usually administered to the dying.

Indeed, as Jones explains in his examination of the *ordo* or order of service for enclosure ceremonies—which he looks at in several pontifical manuscripts, or liturgical books used exclusively by bishops in the performance of certain ceremonies over which only they could preside—a typical enclosure *ordo* included, not only prayers normally recited at a funeral, but also involved a procession into the anchorhold, culminating in the soon-to-be anchorite entering the ‘grave dug within his reclusory’ and the ‘sprinkling of earth on the grave.’²⁶ In certain *ordines*, Jones states: ‘the process of enclosure [is connected] with the “last rites”, specifically by the inclusion of the service of extreme unction, in which the *recludendus* is anointed with oil.’²⁷ In this ceremony

²⁵ McAvoy, *Medieval Anchoritisms*, p. 1. For more on the prevalence of more females than males as anchorites during the late Middle Ages, see: Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards, ‘Introduction: Intersections of Time and Space in Gender and Enclosure’, in *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp. 6-26 (p. 9). For more on the conditions of a typical anchoritic cell, see: Jones, ‘Hermits and Anchorites’, p. 10.

²⁶ E.A. Jones, ‘Ceremonies of Enclosure: Rite, Rhetoric and Reality’, in *Rhetoric of the Anchorhold: Space, Place and Body within the Discourses of Enclosure*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2008), pp. 34-49 (p. 41).

²⁷ Jones, ‘Ceremonies of Enclosure’, p. 43.

involving the administration of extreme unction, the bishop, after applying the oil and reciting a prayer from the Office of the Dead over the anchoritic candidate, then 'shows him his grave, which he enters singing, "Here shall be my repose for ever and ever."'”²⁸ As these rites show, the decision to enter the anchoritic life meant choosing a living death.

The anchoritic vocation got its roots from the early Christian tradition in which particularly devoted spiritual aspirants would retire to the desert to live in solitude and contemplate their faith, in much the same way that the Gospels claim that Jesus did for forty days and nights. Indeed, the early-thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse*, one of the most influential books written for the purposes of guiding anchoresses in their chosen lifestyles—and one which, according to Catherine Innes-Parker, 'there is some evidence that the fourteenth-century anchoress Julian of Norwich read and used'²⁹—approaches and recommends a vision of the calling in that light. 'Ancrene Wisse' imagines anchorites as solitary women practicing a routine of austere reflectiveness in an inner version of the physical desert that was home to their forebears.³⁰ This guide does so, in part, by laying out the correct behaviour expected from one

²⁸ Jones, 'Hermits and Anchorites', p. 12. For more on the rituals surrounding enclosure as they relate to death, see: Anne K. Warren, *Anchorites and Their Patrons in Medieval England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), p. 7.

²⁹ Innes-Parker, Catherine, 'The Legacy of *Ancrene Wisse*: Translations, Adaptations, Influences and Audience, with Special Attention to Women Readers', in *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Yoko Wada (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 145-73 (p. 147). For more on the *Ancrene Wisse* and its role as a guidebook for anchorites, see: Elizabeth Robertson, 'Savoring "Scientia": the Medieval Anchoress Reads *Ancrene Wisse*', in *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Yoko Wada (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 113-44 (p. 115) and Yoko Wada, 'What is *Ancrene Wisse*?', in *A Companion to Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Yoko Wada (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 1-28 (p. 1).

³⁰ Watson and Jenkins, *Writings of Julian*, p. 5.

who has decided to sacrifice the material, worldly elements of life in order exclusively to devote herself to spiritual pursuits.

One of the strongest requirements proffered by this guidebook for anchorites involves the recluse's responsibility to close oneself off from society and the outer world—both on a pragmatic and symbolic level. Having received last rites, it remains the duty of these women to maintain their status as dead whilst alive. As such, *Ancrene Wisse* cautions its intended audience of anchorites that they should not have meals with guests outside of their cells because an anchoress 'is al dead to þe world.'³¹ Thus, the anchorite was admonished and expected to be, according to the rules of the calling laid out in this hugely influential guidebook written in Middle English, more than merely cut off entirely from the ways of life of the rest of society. They were, in fact, on some level, explicitly encouraged to consider themselves as members of a community of, if not the actual dead, then at least of very nearly walking corpses.

Their status as dead whilst alive was underlined in a story that the narrator of *Ancrene Wisse* relates to his audience of three anchoritic sisters. He writes:

A mon wes of religiun, ant com to him efter help his
fleschliche broðer, ant he tahte him to his þridde breðer, þe
wes dead biburiet. Þe ondswerede wundrinde, 'Nai,' (quoð

³¹ Bella Millett, ed., *Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with Variants from Other Manuscripts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 157. On the subject of the anchoritic calling as signifying a death to this world, see: Rotha Mary Clay, *The Hermits and Anchorites of England* (London: Methuen, 1914), p. 73. See also the discussion of other aspects of this rhetoric in Barratt, 'Context', including the motif of the anchorhold as a tomb. And see Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, p. 43 where the rhetorical question is asked, 'for hwet is ancre-hus bute hire burinesse?' [for what is the anchor-house but her grave?].

he) 'nis he dead?' 'Ant Ich', quoð þe hali mon, 'am dead
gasteliche. Na fleschlich freond ne easki me fleschlich
froure.'³²

Therefore, the narrator of this guide for proper anchoritic behaviour is holding up as an example of virtuous and right action, the story of an anchorite who refuses to help his brother in need because of his anchoritic condition as dead to the world, which precludes him from getting involved with the affairs of the living.

If this was too allegorical a sign of the lengths to which anchorites were encouraged to view and, in some sense, comport themselves as dead, the narrator of *Ancrene Wisse* urges his anchoritic audience to 'schrapien euche dei þe eorðe up of hare put þet ha schulen rotien in.'³³ Lest one be tempted to think of this gruesome order to scrape the earth each day from one's grave as fully metaphorical, Jones states that in an enclosure *ordo* of the day, instructions exist that 'dictate that there be ready in the reclusory "a grave of the length of a man and a foot and a half in depth"—which grave, whether he wants to be buried in it after his death or not, the recluse will daily augment.'³⁴ That these instructions were carried out can be found in the evidence of skeletons unearthed in what were once anchoritic cells.³⁵

Therefore, it is certainly not too strong to conclude that anchorites were considered to occupy a space in—or more accurately outside of—society more akin to that inhabited by the dead than that populated by the living. Binski

³² Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, p. 16.

³³ Millett, *Ancrene Wisse*, p. 46.

³⁴ Jones, 'Ceremonies of Enclosure', p. 42.

³⁵ Roberta Gilchrist, *Contemplation and Action: The Other Monasticism* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995), pp. 190-2.

describes this unusual level of existence as ‘the peculiar status of those in religious orders, who were in fact socially dead.’³⁶ And Gilbert elucidates the liminal state in which anchorites were considered to exist when she speaks of their “symbolic death” ... [often involving] rites by which a person moves from the society of the living to that of the dead... [such as] medieval anchorites, [who were] officially dead to secular society.’³⁷ To be an anchorite, therefore, in the era in which Julian assumed this role, would have entailed relinquishing one’s place within the world of the living and accepting a new position situated somewhere in an ill-defined hinterland, where one would be perched precariously between life and death.

Certainly, therefore, one could argue that Julian’s decision to become an anchorite, a position that enabled her to devote the remainder of her life to the pursuit of her desire for God, represented yet another case where, in a sense, she chose death over life (at least partially and symbolically in this instance) in her relentless attempt to obtain the object of her longing (through withdrawing from the world and entering a vocation which would afford her the time and space to meditate on her visions).³⁸ After all, as Watson and Jenkins state of

³⁶ Binski, *Medieval Death*, p. 58.

³⁷ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 10.

³⁸ By the time of Julian’s presumed enclosure, on the cusp of the fifteenth century, as Chewning states, ‘The act of enclosure... for female anchorite or mystic or both, may well have served to lock the world out, to make the world go away, leaving her most certainly gladly alone in her isolation and pursuit of spiritual transcendence.’ Susannah Mary Chewning, ‘Gladly Alone, Gladly Silent: Isolation and Exile in the Anchoritic Mystical Experience’, in *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure in the Middle Ages*, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp. 103-15 (p. 112). See also: Mari Hughes-Edwards, “‘Wrapt as if to the third heaven’: Gender and Contemplation in Late Medieval Anchoritic Guidance Writing”, in *Anchorites, Wombs and Tombs: Intersections of Gender and Enclosure*

Julian's career choice as an anchorite, it was a 'profession into which she would have entered via a ceremony in which a bishop, taking away her old name to give her a new one—the male name of her church's patron saint, probably Julian the Hospitaler—walled her into her cell while reciting the Office of the Dead.'³⁹ Once again, therefore, Julian would have received some form of last rites from a priest, rendering her in the unusual position of twice being recognised as dead by the Church, whilst both times remaining alive.

What is more, in each of these cases, Julian faces death, even entreats it, in various forms, be it biological or philosophical, in order to draw nearer to her spiritual goal, the attainment of her fervent desire for a quantity she believes to be God, yet who morphs and jumps constantly from one form and meaning to another, in much the same manner as Lacan's Thing does. By entering the cell and vocation of the anchorite, Julian would have been able to spend a large proportion of her time reflecting upon the memories and meaning of her visions, something she overtly admits to doing within the pages of her second account, her much-revised and expanded version of her first work, the Long Text.

By effectively removing herself from the demands and responsibilities of the society of the living—even those associated with being a nun—Julian, as an anchorite, would have been in the ideal position to continue following her desire wherever it led. That Julian willingly effaced her individual identity as

in the Middle Ages, ed. Liz Herbert McAvoy and Mari Hughes-Edwards (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), pp. 131-41 (p. 138).

³⁹ Watson and Jenkins, *Writings of Julian*, p. 6. Not every scholar agrees that 'Julian' was a name assumed when the author became enclosed. For more on this see: Jones, 'Anchoritic Aspects', p. 77.

she conducted her process of contemplation on her visions seems borne out by the fact that, she deliberately appears to have elided most, if not all, traces of her identity between the two versions of her texts. An example of this can be seen right at the outset of both works. Julian's Short Text begins by delivering the following introductory information: 'Here es a vision, shewed be the goodenes of God to a devoute woman. And hir name es Julian, that is recluse atte Norwiche and yit is on life, anno domini 1413' (*Vision*, Introduction, 1-2). Here, right away the author of the works is identified by name, by her religious calling in life, by year and by geographical location. In stark contrast, not only does the Long Text fail to provide any of this biographical data in its first few pages, where it only refers to its writer as, 'a simple creature unletterde' (*Revelation*, 2.1), but it never reveals any clues as to the actual historical identity of its creator. Similarly, whereas in the ST Julian gives details about her mother being at her sickbed and closing her eyes, once she believes her daughter to have died (*Vision*, 10.26-8), no such episode whatsoever is related in the LT. Indeed, so extensive was the effort to remove herself as an identifiable individual from her later work, that, 'in the Long Text... [Julian] consistently removes the terms "me", "mine", "myselfe" or any such self-designating phrases that would connote a singular identity (thirty-two examples in all are omitted from the Long Text).'⁴⁰

Thus, between the earlier version of her account of her visionary experiences and her later record, Julian systematically attempts to erase from her text all vestiges of her personality and even her existence as a living human being separate from her identity as a seeker of God. Certainly this would seem

⁴⁰ Miles, 'Space and Enclosure', p. 162.

to be consistent with the attitude and behaviour required of the anchorite by works such as *Ancrene Wisse*. And it also appears to reflect the mindset and intention of one who longed to block out everything extraneous to her goal of drawing nearer to her coveted Lord, in whatever guise he might assume.

Julian would have had some traditional support for her decision to enclose herself as an anchorite, 'as the culturally hybrid figure and occupier of a middle ground located "between two deaths", between this world and the next,'⁴¹ in order to further her progress towards attaining her desire. This was because it was believed, in the late Middle Ages, that, due to the exact type of sacrifice that s/he herself made, the decision to renounce the material pursuits and pleasures of worldly life, in exchange for a state of solitude that in essence transported one beyond the status of the living and allowed for utter focus on devotional practices, 'the holy anchorite... trod a rarified pathway from insight to illumination, from solitariness to union with God in an ultimate, joyous "homecoming".'⁴² Yet, even though this choice to become an anchorite, and thus symbolically dead, would have offered Julian a somewhat socially accepted and Church-sanctioned means to pursue and get closer to her desired object, her beloved God, it still would have represented a radical course of action. Once again, Julian proved with this behaviour, this extreme, one could say, assumption of a status and a lifestyle outside the norm of society, that she was willing to go to any lengths to follow her desire, even passing beyond the bounds of death—this time a symbolic form of expiration—for a second time.

⁴¹ McAvoy, *Medieval Anchoritisms*, p. 111.

⁴² McAvoy, *Medieval Anchoritisms*, p. 4.

It is worth noting, however, that, in the light of Lacanian psychoanalytical thought, Julian's version of a second form of death, one beyond the biological, would perhaps not have risen quite to the level of his definition of the concept of 'symbolic' death. This is because, to Lacan, symbolic death involves the complete erasure of the subject from the chain of signifiers that constitute language and that comprise the Symbolic order, that realm into which each individual is thrust the moment he or she realises his or her separate identity at the mirror phase of development. Lacan defines his version of this form of supplementary, non-biological death as follows: 'the second death... death insofar as it is regarded as the point at which the very cycles of the transformations of nature are annihilated. This is the point where the false metaphors of being (*l'étant*) can be distinguished from the position of Being (*l'être*) itself.'⁴³ This death, therefore, occurs when the false, illusory self-impressions formed by the opinions of others or the Other, as expressed by the chain of signifiers in the Symbolic order and by the opinions and impressions of the self and the Other in the Imaginary realm are revealed as unreal in comparison to the position of Being, of nature itself.

To recap, according to Lacanian theory, it is the Symbolic register, a pre-set realm comprised of the ideas and expectations of others, that defines a human being's reality, or his or her normative perception of the world and his or her place within it.⁴⁴ The Imaginary order,⁴⁵ on the other hand, represents, in Lacan's formulation, merely the individual's embellishment of her or his sense of self, based on the already projected identity provided by the Symbolic order

⁴³ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 248.

⁴⁴ Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 201-3.

⁴⁵ Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 82-4.

and expressed or defined in terms of language. Whereas, the order of the Real⁴⁶ is actually an impossible place, a place beyond language and its restrictions, thus a place of true being, but one in which, ironically, nothing can truly exist.

When one is able to escape the chains of the Symbolic and the Imaginary orders and puncture the Real, one experiences *jouissance*,⁴⁷ the almost unbearable pain/pleasure of pure being-ness located beyond the restrictions, expectations and definitions imposed upon one by others that inevitably limit and block one from the wholeness one experienced before the traumatic split brought about by the mirror phase.⁴⁸ Yet, paradoxically and nevertheless inevitably, in Lacanian thought, because the Real exists beyond the bounds of language—the only viable means humankind has to communicate ideas and concepts to itself and others—it is considered simply and pragmatically impossible to enter the Real and simultaneously still continue to live, at least in any way that can be communicated or described in words. Thus, for this reason, radical and unrelenting desire for the Thing—which translates into a ceaseless longing for *jouissance* and for a restoration of lost wholeness, that leads to entry into the realm of the Real—can be equated with a desire for death, and death of a kind that is as final and consequential as biological expiration.

According to Lacan, this register of the Real is ‘the site of desire insofar as it is desire of nothing, the relationship of man to his lack of being.’⁴⁹ This desire for the Thing, when one determines to follow it to its end, is what Lacan defines as Freud’s death drive. He explains: ‘What one finds at the level of *Das*

⁴⁶ Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 159-61.

⁴⁷ Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 91-2.

⁴⁸ Evans, *Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, pp. 114-5.

⁴⁹ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 298.

Ding once it is revealed is the place of the *Triebe*, the drives. And I mean by that the drives that, as Freud showed, have nothing at all to do with something that may be satisfied by moderation.⁵⁰ It is such a commitment to desire for the Thing, which rises to the level of the drive, that compels one to trespass across all barriers and enter the order of the Real, escaping, if only temporarily, from language and the signifier.

If one attains a form of symbolic or second death, a complete removal from the chain of signifiers, due to following one's desire past all limits—in the way that Lacan describes that Antigone, the titular hero of the Greek tragedy of the same name written by Sophocles, does⁵¹—then, in a sense, one achieves a level of extinction unsurpassed in human experience. This is because one has placed oneself beyond language and, according to Lacan:

Outside of language it is inconceivable, and the being of him who has lived cannot be detached from all he bears with him in the nature of good and evil, of destiny, of consequences for others, or of feelings for himself... [because] language punctuates everything that occurs in the movement of life.⁵²

Thus, to Lacan, without language nothing can be conceived of in regards to an individual and his or her place in life. Language essentially, therefore, provides the tools to express literally everything about what makes up a human life. So, without language, as far as this conception goes, all that a person may or may not have been or represented goes mute and simply ceases to be, without

⁵⁰ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 110.

⁵¹ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 263. There will be a much more in-depth discussion about Lacan's focus on Antigone and, in particular the role she plays as his exemplar of one who follows her desire beyond all bounds, a little later on in this chapter.

⁵² Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 279.

leaving a trace that it ever existed. Or, as Lacan puts it, 'It is in the signifier and insofar as the subject articulates a signifying chain that he comes up against the fact that he may disappear from the chain of what he is.'⁵³ It is this radical and final removal from the chain of signifiers that constitutes a symbolic or second death within Lacanian thought.

Lacan confirms this when he states that, 'the second death... [the removal from] language demands of [man] that he realize the following, namely that he is not.'⁵⁴ Gilbert elucidates this idea further, applying it to a societal context, when she explains that, 'since the symbolic aspect relates to social, political, cultural and linguistic order as systems abstracted from content or actual realization (which belongs to the Imaginary), symbolic death concerns whether or not someone is considered to exist as a person.'⁵⁵ When seen from this angle, symbolic death, by erasing the very roots of one's entry into language itself, eradicates human existence far more efficiently and permanently than any other action ever could. Not only does one effectively cease to exist, but, due to one's exclusion from language and thus the chain of signifiers, there is no longer, nor will there ever be any sign or intimation whatsoever that one's life or being ever occurred.

In a sense, in fact, not only is the individual identity erased by Lacan's concept of symbolic death, but a part of the Symbolic order itself, the part that admitted his or her identity into its rolls, also is destroyed. As Žižek expresses this conclusion, 'the "second death", the radical annihilation of the Symbolic order implies a possibility of its radical effacement, of "symbolic death"—not

⁵³ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 295.

⁵⁴ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 298.

⁵⁵ Gilbert, *Living Death*, pp. 9-10.

the death of the so-called “real object” in its symbol, but the obliteration of the signifying network itself.⁵⁶ Thus, symbolic death, in this extrapolation of the Lacanian notion of the concept, involves the sheer demolition of not only the individual identity, but of a whole section of the Symbolic register itself.

Clearly, based upon this understanding of Lacan’s formulation of symbolic death, this version of a second, non-physical form of extinction appears to be far more final and extreme than the one that Julian embraced by relinquishing her name and identity to become enclosed as an anchorite. Such a relinquishment of one’s position or definition of self within society, even if it was associated with death to the extent that traditional funereal rites were administered, would not have amounted to the full erasure from existence that distinguishes Lacan’s version of symbolic death.⁵⁷

Instead, the second death that Julian assumed, her particular version of symbolic extinction, actually more accurately involved a transition from one level of societal and cultural existence to another, rather than a removal from being altogether. This is backed up by the fact that, according to contemporary evidence in late-medieval accounts of anchoritic life, far from disappearing completely from society once they had taken their vows, received last rites and been enclosed within their cells, anchorites actually took on a new role with a new set of responsibilities within society.⁵⁸ Some of these responsibilities were quite public, interactive and even prestigious, including offering guidance to

⁵⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 132.

⁵⁷ Nevertheless it is still helpful to see Julian’s sacrificial second death in light of Lacan’s conception of symbolic death, as will be discussed in the pages to follow, because they both involve radical departures from societal and cultural norms in pursuit of an unwavering and transgressive desire.

⁵⁸ McAvoy and Hughes-Edwards, ‘Intersections of Time and Space’, p. 17.

laypeople who would come to visit them for that purpose, as Margery Kempe did with Julian.

Therefore, despite the admonitions to desert-style silence and solitude offered by texts, such as *Ancrene Wisse*, which were intended to teach anchorites how to live as if dead, these people actually maintained, in many cases, a fair amount of contact and interactivity with those in their communities. As Watson and Jenkins state: 'The solitude *Ancrene Wisse* ascribes to [anchorites] is metaphoric, not physical: far from living in isolation, anchorites were public figures, performing every Christian's need for detachment from the world and inner solitude before God.'⁵⁹ And in Julian's case, her cell was located 'in a large busy neighbourhood of one of England's largest cities, [which] must have left her far more exposed to the world than she would have been as a nun.'⁶⁰ Rather than pursuing an existence of utter solitude, therefore, one that relied upon a total removal from all contact with the living, an anchorite, such as Julian of Norwich, would in actuality have been required to perform intercessory duties on behalf of those still playing roles as alive and functioning members of society. As Jones sums it up: 'the anchoritic life could not be lived in splendid isolation.'⁶¹ Thus, after all, the symbolic death that Julian accepts by becoming an anchorite, in the furtherance of her pursuit of her desire, does not match the complete eradication from existence of Lacan's version of symbolic death. Yet, as mentioned before, it was still arguably quite an extreme step for Julian to have taken in order to follow the goal she coveted, as it involved a lifelong commitment to a lifestyle that

⁵⁹ Watson and Jenkins, *Writings of Julian*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ Watson and Jenkins, *Writings of Julian*, p. 5.

⁶¹ Jones, 'Anchoritic Aspects', p. 78.

effectively closed off most avenues of conventional, material pursuits. She was willing to do this, as was Antigone, due to her desire to follow her coveted Lord or Thing (or in Antigone's case her desire to bury her brother) wherever that desire may lead, even past the boundaries of removal from cultural and societal membership.

As we have seen to this point, the ideas of death that Lacan and Julian (as a product of late-medieval society), profess in their works differ in the degree of finality that each respectively attributes to the state. Thus, to Lacan, death in both its biological and symbolic permutations means the absolute termination of an individual's life. To Julian, on the other hand, death acts merely as a doorway from one status or form of existence to another, all in preparation for a final restoration to life with the arrival of the Judgment Day prophesied in the Christian scriptures.

Yet, there is one instance in which Julian's thought, as reflected in her texts, does admit for the possibility of a type of death that would rise to the level of permanence and totality of the extinction envisioned in Lacanian theory. It is this form of mortality, I contend, that Julian is referring to when she proclaims, 'mankind shuld be restored fro doubil deth' (*Revelation*, 55.38). What is this 'doubil deth' to which Julian refers here and what would lead one to conclude that it is any more permanent than the other forms of extinction that medieval society treats as liminal? It appears that the second death to which Julian's statement is alluding and from which she believes that humanity needs to be rescued is tied in with the concept of eternal and irrevocable damnation of the sort mentioned above and explicated by Augustine.

This particular notion of a second death had been a part of Christian eschatology from the very earliest days of the religion's formation and had always connoted a radical ending to human life, although its specific understanding of this denouement had evolved over the centuries along with the development of the faith. Gilbert explains the concept and its evolution into the form it took in the late Middle Ages, as follows:

Although in early Christianity the second death which was the fate of non-Christians may arguably have been envisaged as simple ceasing to be... [by the late Middle Ages] damnation, for Christians and others, had become an eternity of torment actively suffered by a conscious sentient being whose awareness formed an essential element of his torture.⁶²

Interestingly enough, the original Christian concept of second death, therefore, would have shared the element of utter finality and eradication from life and consciousness that Lacan's versions of death—both the first and the second—display.

However, by Julian's day, this initial Christian idea of utter erasure from life had been replaced in all concepts of death, including, one suspects, in that which she designates as 'doubl deth,' by a sort of unending suffering that would have been in many ways worse than the simple removal of one's awareness or consciousness inherent in Lacan's notion of death. This development of the concept of double death from cessation of existence into a content-filled state of suffering, which matched the narrative of redemption and

⁶² Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 4. For more on this, see: Daniell, *Death and Burial*, p. 12 and Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, pp. 344-5.

damnation upon which Church teachings became predicated, would have been inevitable in light of the precepts of the Christian religion. It is also a phenomenon upon which Lacan appears to opine, when he comments:

I am interested in the second death, the one that you can still set your sights on once death has occurred... After all, the human tradition has never ceased to keep this second death in mind... in the same way it has never ceased to imagine a second form of suffering, a suffering beyond death that is indefinitely sustained by the impossibility of crossing the limit of [this] second death. And that is why the tradition of hell in different forms has always remained alive.⁶³

Although different from Lacan's conception of death, it is possible to suggest that the apparent finality of this damnation (which to Julian and Augustine essentially represents the ultimate and final separation from God, and thus their desired) comes closest to mirroring that profound absence of life that forms the basis of all ideas of mortality in Lacanian theory. This is, then, the closest approach that Julian's and Lacan's concepts of death make to one another. Yet, even in this case of 'double death,' Julian still holds out hope that God can restore humans from this terminal state, defying once again Lacan's insistence on the utter inevitability and definitiveness of human extinction.

Despite the differing definitions which both Lacan and Julian would have applied to their understandings of death, be it biological or symbolic, the salient fact remains that Julian chose to embrace what she believed to be death twice, and perhaps many times more than that in an imaginative fashion, as will be

⁶³ Lacan, *Ethics*, pp. 294-5.

discussed in the next section—in pursuit of her desire to draw nearer to her beloved God. It is this intensity of commitment, in service to her yearning, regardless of what sort of death was being contemplated as a sacrifice, that I would now like to discuss through the prism of Lacan's discussion of the two deaths, and the space he defines between them, in relation to the play *Antigone* in his *Seminar VII*.

Death in Julian's Texts in Relation to Lacan's 'Space between Two Deaths'

At this juncture—having offered evidence of Julian's encounters with and transgressions of death as related in her texts and also as suggested by what we can surmise about the circumstances of her life as an anchorite—it is time to examine more closely the significance of certain aspects of death in Julian's works, in light of Lacan's formulations on the 'two deaths,' as elucidated in his exploration of Sophocles' Greek tragedy *Antigone*.

Basically *Antigone*, at least the part of it that interests Lacan in his treatment of the play over several sessions of his *Seminar VII* series in 1960, deals with the issue of one woman's, the titular Antigone's, refusal to back down in the face of certain biological death, in order to salvage her brother, Polyneices, from the fate of symbolic death. Antigone flouts the strict orders of her uncle, Creon, the king, not to bury Polyneices, by attempting to inter him anyway. She does this, despite the knowledge that such an action will most likely bring about her own physical extinction, because his non-burial in ancient Greek culture equalled a removal from the annals of memory (effectively the Symbolic order of Lacan), epitomised for the Greeks by their concept of the afterlife. Such a non-burial, therefore, would have, in essence,

amounted to Polyneices' utter eradication from existence, constituting a second death to rival that of Lacan's formulation, which, as mentioned earlier, also involves the erasure of the individual from the thoughts (represented by language and the chain of signifiers) of others. Of the consequences of this action of Antigone's, Lacan comments:

The central third of the text [of *Antigone*]... informs us about the meaning of the situation or fate of a life that is about to turn into certain death, a death lived by anticipation, a death that crosses over into the sphere of life, a life that moves into the realm of death.⁶⁴

The aspect of *Antigone* that Lacan appears to be primarily concerned with looking at here involves the example of one who, because of a decision she has made to pursue a certain course of action, has relinquished the status of the living and figuratively entered the realm of the dead or, more accurately, the pre-dead, whilst still in possession of a living body. The unusual position of neither being dead nor alive, in which Antigone's action places her, represents for Lacan a state or a place which he designates as 'the space between two deaths.'⁶⁵

This concept of Lacan's can help to shed light on what led Julian of Norwich, according to the evidence in her texts and from the brief details of her life, to enter and occupy liminal states that had her perched precariously in spaces poised between life and death. Whether, as described in her texts, engaged in a prolonged (and oft re-experienced, through repeated

⁶⁴ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 248.

⁶⁵ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 320.

contemplation of her visions) near-deathbed illness or embracing, as her biographical details suggest, the dead-while-alive status of an anchorite, Julian, like Antigone in Lacan's formulation, proves herself willing to breach all limits in order to pursue her desire. After all, it was as a result of a deathly, almost fatal illness that Julian first entered her visionary communication with her sought beloved. Immediately after acquiescing to the seeming encouragement she has received (in the form of a temporary cessation of her pain) to intentionally long for God, by following Christ up to, and if need be beyond, the very borders of extinction (through keeping her gaze fixed on a crucifix, as noted in chapter one of this thesis), Julian abruptly receives her first vision. She states: 'With him I desired to suffer, living in my deadly body, as God would give me grace... And in this sodenly I saw the red blood trekile downe from under the garlande' (*Revelation*, 3.43-4 and 4.1-2). Thus, after deciding consciously that she wished to and would spend what was left of her ebbing life contemplating sharing in Christ's suffering and death, as she herself died, Julian suddenly finds herself transported into the realm of her showings and into the very presence of the incarnate Lord for whom she has yearned since youth. Furthermore, after surviving this initial nearly mortal illness, it is through meditatively reliving, over and again, Christ's death and her particular visionary experience of it, in an anchoritic cell in which her grave might greet her every single day, that she continues to draw closer and closer to her sought love.

I will now take a deeper look at Lacan's formulation of the two deaths. Gilbert explains the exemplary role which Antigone plays in elucidating this concept when she says, 'Sophocles' Antigone is a key figure in discussions of the

Lacanian *entre-deux-morts*. She forms a pendant to Polyneices: if he is physically but not yet symbolically dead, then she is symbolically dead from the moment she decides to bury her brother in defiance of Creon's edict.⁶⁶ Having taken the radical step of choosing to liberate her brother from a second expiration she clearly views as insupportable, Antigone immediately disqualifies herself from life. Yet, still being in possession of a breathing body, she now occupies the strange space of one who is already marked for certain death, and thus no longer holds the same value within society, one who is practically speaking beyond it, whilst still technically remaining within its borders by virtue of being biologically alive.

Lacan describes the unusual space that Antigone inhabits (which is eerily akin to that occupied by those who adapt a life of anchoritic enclosure) as a result of her extreme action, as follows: 'the moment when she crosses the entrance to the zone between life and death... Her punishment will consist in her being shut up or suspended in the zone between life and death. Although she is not yet dead, she is eliminated from the world of the living.'⁶⁷ Thus, clearly, Antigone represents, for Lacan, an example of one who has, for some reason, opted to perform an action that she knows will bring about certain death, utter eradication from the annals of the living.

What is of most relevance, in Lacan's discussion of this zone between two deaths, for the purposes of shedding light on Julian's treatment of death in her texts, involves the element that desire, more specifically desire for the Thing, plays in his examination of the concept. Specifically, according to Lacan's

⁶⁶ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 18.

⁶⁷ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 280.

commentary in regards to Antigone's pivotal decision that lands her effectively in the untenable position of being neither fully alive nor yet dead, it is because of one thing and one thing alone that Antigone has taken such an extreme course of action—her refusal to 'give ground relative to [her] desire.'⁶⁸ Furthermore, it is not just a simple desire that Antigone chases relentlessly which causes her to cross boundaries in its name that most people would never even consider traversing. Rather it is desire for the Thing—desire for that which resides within an object or series of objects, most often designated by Lacan as *petit objet a*, but is not contained by it or them, instead shifting and jumping and morphing from object to object—that has the power, if followed unswervingly, through a metonymy of objects, to compel one to transgress even the most sacred of limits in its pursuit. What the subject finds, after breaching these borders, which can masquerade as some semblance of physical or symbolic mortality, but which all involve puncturing the realm of the Real in some fashion, is a taste of *jouissance*, that momentary jolt of almost insupportable pleasurable pain or painful pleasure that awaits those who escape from the restrictions and limitations imposed by the Symbolic and Imaginary orders. This transgression in pursuit of this substance or experience, which resides inherently within the desired Thing, can be to Lacan very problematic when taken to the extreme that Antigone takes it. In her case, obviously, to chase such a desire is to transgress all boundaries so completely that it leads to extinction—twice. This is a conclusion which Lacan explicitly expresses when he says of Antigone, his example of one who hunts desire beyond all bounds, that she 'pushes to the limit the realization of something

⁶⁸ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 321.

that might be called the pure and simple desire of death as such.’⁶⁹ In this way Antigone exemplifies the Lacanian version of Freud’s death drive.

Irigaray offers a rebuttal to Lacan’s assessment of Antigone’s choice as representing a desire for death. Rather, she classifies Antigone’s behaviour in terms of one who, when faced with supporting an action (the non-burial of her brother) that she feels would be damaging to the cosmic order, and thus life itself on a universal scale, opts to *preserve* what she sees as the values of life on a macrocosmic level, rather than to save her own mortality. As Irigaray explains: ‘To such a state of merely surviving, Antigone says: no. Can we then talk about a desire for dying, or about a love for life? Is it not surviving at any cost that testifies to a wish to die rather than to really live? This choice does not suit Antigone’⁷⁰ Nevertheless, whether Antigone’s sacrifice was, as Lacan posits, a useless one, pointed only at a needless extinction, or, as Irigaray suggests, a heroic one aimed at shoring up the foundations of natural and vibrant life, the fact remains that it entailed following her radical desire beyond the boundaries of death, in two forms.

Whilst most people, according to Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, are content, even eager, to remain within the Symbolic and Imaginary registers, pursuing less extreme wants and behaviours—summed up by his understanding of Freud’s pleasure principle—there are those few, such as Antigone, and I contend Julian of Norwich, who simply cannot quell or deny their desire for the Thing. Instead they insist upon following their all-consuming passion for the *jouissance* that resides within something that, whilst

⁶⁹ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 282.

⁷⁰ Luce Irigaray, *In the Beginning, She Was* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 125-6.

its appearance may keep shifting, leads them again and again to follow it beyond all boundaries, into the realm of the Real, past the level of language itself, which to Lacan is, for all intents and purposes, that which constitutes life itself. When desire rises to this transgressive level in a subject, such as Antigone, Lacan defines it in terms of a death drive, which was discussed above, as originally articulated by Freud and now refined by Lacan to mean a desire so strong and focused that it inevitably leads the individual to flout all laws of society and to perform actions that lead to repeated puncturing of the Real, which in its repercussion of absenting the subject from the chain of signifiers, amounts to a form of death. As such, this drive, this radical desire, represents for Lacan an inherently destructive force.

The case of the protagonist Antigone ideally represents the working of this death drive in Lacanian theory. This is because, as Gilbert expresses it, Antigone's 'action's significance in [Lacan's] view lies in the fact that the working of the destruction drive is revealed most clearly by the subject's choice of a course of action which is not merely disallowed but inexplicable and foreclosed. Maintaining one's choice unto death.'⁷¹ Therefore, Antigone, when faced with the option to let her desire to bury her brother drop and obey the laws imposed by society, chooses instead to flout these laws and to pursue her desire all the way to death itself, in two forms.

Once again, Irigaray offers a different viewpoint on the motivation behind, if not the end result of, Antigone's decision to follow her desire relentlessly and without compromise. She opines: 'It is not true that Antigone wants all at once, an all external to her, or to die. She wants to be the whole that

⁷¹ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 21.

she is as a living being. And it is true that if she gives up being this whole, she will die, in one way or another. She wants to live and not to die’⁷² Essentially, to Irigaray, Antigone’s choice to follow her desire is a choice for life, in its larger meaning, and against the death that survival at the cost of obeying her uncle’s unnatural edict would have ultimately represented.

Whilst the medieval anchorite chose, in a similar fashion to Lacan’s interpretation of Antigone, to absent her- or himself from society and culture in order ostensibly to pursue his or her desire (in this case a desire for God), in the Middle Ages this action was not seen as flouting the laws of society. Rather it was viewed as selflessly assuming the role of extreme religious piety to which very few could aspire, on behalf of the rest of the Christian community. As such, ‘the anchorhold... and the isolated body within it, is the place where is staged a forever-repeated performance of communal desire by the anchoritic “method actor” within, a staging which... serves repeatedly to re-enact, order and confirm the structure of communal thoughts and feelings.’⁷³ However, just as in Lacan’s formulation of the dangerous possibilities inherent in Antigone’s desire-fuelled decision, so too does the choice of anchoritic enclosure offer ‘the permanent possibility for transgression and change.’⁷⁴ Thus, not only was Julian’s choice to follow her beloved into biological death a radical one, but her possible foray into symbolic death in the anchorhold also could have been deemed extreme. And whilst ensconced in the anchoritic enclosure, her symbolic tomb, Julian opts again and again to enter death—hers and Christ’s—

⁷² Irigaray, *In the Beginning*, p. 126.

⁷³ McAvoy and Hughes-Edwards, ‘Intersections of Time and Space’, pp. 18-9.

⁷⁴ McAvoy and Hughes-Edwards, ‘Intersections of Time and Space’, p. 19.

by meditatively immersing herself in her visions, which begin with the promise of death and remain steeped in it for at least the first third of her texts.

Antigone's decision is extremely instructive for Lacan, as it illustrates the destructive power that individual desire for the Thing can have, when it simply will not be denied, and thus rises to the level of the drive, and when it is followed to the exclusion of all other external forces and/or rules. This relentless fixation on one's desire, to the exclusion of all else, according to Lacanian thought, inevitably leads to a transgressing of the most basic and self-preserving of limits. In Lacanian theory, therefore, 'to insist on one's desire is... to resist not just a given society but sociality itself. Similarly, although dying is unavoidable, the preference for death over giving up on one's desire is a short circuit which extracts the subject from the self-reproducing cycle of social existence.'⁷⁵ After all, normative desires do not typically result in such extreme behaviour. As Lacan explains this idea, using the conception of Freud's pleasure principle: 'it is evident that the first formulation of the pleasure principle as an unpleasure principle, or least-suffering principle, naturally embodies a beyond, but that it is, in effect, calculated to keep us on this side of it rather than beyond it. Freud's use of the good can be summed up in the notion that it keeps us a long way from our *jouissance*.'⁷⁶ Most people then, according to Lacanian theory, prefer to pay allegiance to the pleasure principle, rather than the death drive, and thus simply do not pursue their desire all the way to the end.

However, it is precisely when desire for the Thing is hunted relentlessly and unstintingly that it leads to such extreme choices as the one made by

⁷⁵ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 21.

⁷⁶ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 185.

Antigone. At this point, as mentioned above, desire for the Thing can be equated with a drive for destruction, even if it is a destruction of the ego or identity, rather than of the body or even the symbolic persona. As Žižek encapsulates this progression, as illustrated by Lacan's example of Antigone: 'insofar as we follow Antigone and "do not give way on our desire", do we not precisely step out of the domain of desire, do we not shift from the modality of desire into the modality of pure drive.'⁷⁷ And once one has passed from the level of simple desire into that of the unrestrained drive, as Antigone has, according to Lacan and Žižek, then there are no limits that the subject will not violate in pursuit of her desired quantity or Thing.

As Gilbert sums up this contention: 'In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the figure of the protagonist... reveals the workings of the death drive, indifferent to the interests of a fragile social order and of the organism itself.'⁷⁸ Thus, in this iteration of the drive, as exemplified by Antigone, the individual's desire for the Thing impels her to go beyond the laws and moral precepts of her society, as well as her own inner imperative for self-preservation. In this way, her desire has exempted her from the same motivations and rules that govern the lives of most within her society.

Notably, here again, Irigaray completely disagrees with this Lacanian contention. She asserts that it is society's laws, as constructed by the patriarchal and selfish ruler, Creon, that are amoral and destructive, when viewed against the laws of a higher order—that of nature. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to Irigaray that Antigone follow her desire, despite its flouting of

⁷⁷ Žižek, *Looking Awry*, p. 172.

⁷⁸ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 12.

society's rules, because in this way she is opting to preserve the highest laws upon which all societies are founded and by which they are sustained. As Irigaray expresses it: 'Antigone cannot submit to the arbitrary laws on which Creon founds his power—that is, to a basically nihilist order—because she defends life and its values.'⁷⁹

Whereas clearly, from his vantage point, as Gilbert explains, 'Lacan's Antigone is... driven by an amoral imperative that sets her apart from everyone.'⁸⁰ That desire for the Thing, pursued to the exclusion of all else, and thus elevated to the level of the drive, would result in the subject's figurative, and even literal, exile from normative society and its flow of interactive exchange, is inevitable within the Lacanian formulation of this concept. This is because, one like 'Antigone, who goes to the limit, who "doesn't give way on her desire"... becomes, in this persistence in the "death drive", in the being-towards-death, frighteningly ruthless, exempted from the circle of everyday feelings and considerations, passions and fears.'⁸¹ Rather than considering the feelings or motivations of others, instead of obeying the rules and laws of society, such a person under the sway of radical desire in the form of the drive pays heed only to the dictates of her desire for the Thing, and absolutely nothing else.

This single-minded focus on attaining only her coveted and transgressive goal would, in the midst of people dedicated to following the dictates of the pleasure principle and remaining firmly established within the relative safety and comfort of the Symbolic and Imaginary orders which

⁷⁹ Irigaray, *In the Beginning*, p. 124.

⁸⁰ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 20

⁸¹ Žižek, *Sublime Object*, p. 117.

support society's functioning, certainly serve to render the desiring subject as different, even monstrous or aberrant and definitely external to the normal concourse and congress of societal behaviour. Since, in Lacanian theory, 'human desires do not relate to biological need, cannot be rationalized, and are essentially singular, hence unpredictable, unintelligible and potentially illegitimate in the eyes of others,'⁸² pursuing such a desire to the exclusion of all else would naturally tend to make society view an individual with distrust, if not outright revulsion.

The desire-driven subject, in such an instance, could even be described as lacking certain 'human' emotional reactions and responses. It is from this viewpoint that Lacan asserts that, 'it is "certain" that at least one of the protagonists right through to the end [of the play] feels neither fear nor pity, and that is Antigone.'⁸³ That Lacan attributes this lack of two pivotal emotions that usually regulate and proscribe human behaviour directly to Antigone's radical decision to follow her desire for the Thing past all reasonable limits, he makes clear when he states that Antigone shows that, 'the access to desire necessitates crossing not only all fear but all pity, because the voice of the hero trembles before nothing.'⁸⁴ So one-pointed is Antigone on the realization of her longing to ensure that her brother, Polyneices, receive a proper burial and a resurrection from symbolic death that she will allow nothing to stand in her way. Caught up in the drive and so carried away by its demands, Antigone is oblivious to the horrendous ramifications her choice will wreak upon her own biological and symbolic mortality. This renders her, in Lacan's eyes, beyond the

⁸² Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 14.

⁸³ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 258

⁸⁴ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 323.

normative emotions of those not driven exclusively by desire. For, had Antigone been motivated by anything less than desire for the Thing, surely fear and pity or some other restraining emotion would have prevailed and prevented her from willingly marching to a double death, one that not only destroyed her body, but irrevocably removed all traces of her existence from the rolls of humanity.

Indeed, when followed relentlessly, desire for the Thing in the form of the death drive inevitably leads one in its grips, in one way or another, to separate her- or himself from the annals of regular human life. In Antigone's case, her pursuit of her desire results in her catapulting into and inhabiting a figurative space poised somewhere between a symbolic death she has already incurred and just prior to a biological death which is imminent. Because the place of exile from society within which Antigone's flouting and transgression of limitations in pursuit of her desire has placed her relates directly to mortality, Lacan refers to it as the 'space between two deaths.' Yet, not all those who hunt their desire for the Thing unrelentingly and one-pointedly end up having to make the same extreme choice, in relation to extinction, with which Antigone is faced.

Nevertheless, the concept that Lacan appears to be underlining with this designation involves his contention that desire for the Thing, at the level of the drive, does require that one in its thrall be ready and willing to give up everything, in effect, to die, again and again if necessary, whilst living, in order to keep chasing one's coveted goal wherever it may lead. To Lacan this dedication to the drive causes a subject to exist within a state of being that he defines as, 'being-for-death, in the midst of desires... the zone between-two-

deaths.’⁸⁵ Since desire for the Thing does not always result in a subject following it over the precipice into physical or symbolic mortality, it would be logical to assume that Lacan’s definition of this space in which one finds oneself when following such a desire, past all boundaries, can be expanded to encompass more figurative forms of expiration, as well as the two more literal ones that Antigone faced and crossed.

In fact, Lacan seems explicitly to confirm the accuracy of this more expansive view of the space between two deaths, when he appears specifically to define it in terms of desire for *Das Ding*, stating that ‘the death drive... points to the site that I designate alternatively as impassable or as the site of the Thing.’⁸⁶ It is, therefore, a place of extremity, whether it involves actually trespassing across the verge of actual death, to which one is brought by one’s refusal or inability to give way on one’s desire for the Thing, or giving one’s all in some other fashion in order to pursue that quantity within all objects that leads one to transgress the borders of the Real, a realm that Lacan equates to symbolic death, in search of a filling in of the originary gap and thus a taste of *jouissance*.

In terms of the relevance in this particular reading of the ‘space between two deaths’ to the incidences and descriptions of mortality in Julian of Norwich’s texts, I would like to suggest that there are signs within Julian’s writings that indicate that her own self-described desire for God, her version of a Lacanian concept of desire for the Thing, results in the creation of a situation or place of sorts that shares many similarities with this liminal zone beyond

⁸⁵ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 320.

⁸⁶ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 213.

conceptualized by Lacan. This 'space', I will argue, takes shape in Julian's texts as the site at which Julian describes the moment of what should be the culmination of Christ's Passion—the drama of which she has been unfolding in her narration over several chapters, spanning the first third of *A Revelation*—but which actually, as represented by her, plays out as something entirely different and wholly unexpected, what can only be described as a mysterious non-death.

Christ's Non-Death as Julian's Gateway to Desire Fulfilled—Or Lacan's Realm of the Real

Before discussing the non-death of Jesus and attempting to prove the ability of this occurrence to serve as a sort of 'space between two deaths' in Julian's texts, in regards to her ongoing pursuit of her coveted Lord, her desired Thing, I would first like to revisit Julian's depiction of her own run up to and then swerve away from physical expiration.⁸⁷ This is because this near-death state, which recedes and returns throughout her reception of the visions as described in her works, provides the first example of Julian's transgression of mortality in pursuit of her yearning and her introduction to a sort of *jouissance*.

Furthermore, this brush with expiration, by focusing her attention on the crucifix and the Passion playing out upon this implement of destruction, opens the door to Jesus' aborted death, the experience that will become, in essence, a form of the zone between two deaths for Julian, the symbolic launching pad for all her future forays into the beyond of death, Lacan's realm of the Real.

⁸⁷ This topic was already discussed, in a different context, in the beginning of this chapter, on p. 202.

Whilst Julian spends only the first three chapters of *A Revelation* portraying the circumstances of her illness and its inexorable march up to death, she returns within her narrative often to the fact that she is on her deathbed throughout the entire period in which her showings are revealed to her. This circumstance alone qualifies Julian's status of ill-unto-death as a form of Lacan's 'space between two deaths' simply by virtue of the fact that it is a place of 'being-for-death' that she has arrived at and inhabits, due to her willingness to follow her desire past all limits and into the jaws of physical destruction itself.

Other critics appear to agree that Julian's near-death state signifies a separate 'place' of its own, one that enables her to enter her visions and chase her sought God in a way that she, herself, suggests she was unable to do when healthy and a member of the normative society of the living. This is illustrated by McAvoy's take on the particular zone that Julian's morbidly sick status affords her, described in terms of Kristeva's concept of:

the semiotic *chora*—the pre-symbolic, enclosed and sealed site of unity which underpins all human existence... "the place where the subject is both generated and negated." Thus, in Julian's sick room, as a desperately ill and helpless woman she experiences human negation, whilst at the same [time] she is (re) generated as a visionary woman.⁸⁸

So, in this interpretation, Julian's illness has transported her to an entirely different level of existence, a space outside of the norm, one so unique and

⁸⁸ McAvoy, *Medieval Anchoritisms*, p. 121. McAvoy here is referring to a discussion on the concept of the *chora* found in Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader*, pp. 94-5.

powerful, in fact, that it confers upon her the ability to eradicate her previous identity and assume a new one. The similarity that Kristeva's *chora* shares with Lacan's 'space between two deaths' lies in the capability both 'places' afford to the subjects who enter and operate from them to pierce the Real, or the order where identity (and language) dissipates, and to return transformed.

Julian herself seems to concur that—perhaps by virtue of her exposure to her own physical suffering, and as I shall explore next, that of Christ—she has crossed some sort of divide between the world of the living and that of the dead or at least the beyond-life, which has shown her a glimpse of a place between or beyond deaths. She appears to confirm this when she declares, 'And by the tempest and the sorow that we fall in on oure perty, we be ofte deed, as to mannes dome in erth. But in the sight of God, the soule that shall be safe was never deed, ne never shall' (*Revelation*, 50.2-4). Therefore, according to a plausible parsing of these words, Julian is stating that, whilst one's experiences in life—such as a near-death illness, for instance—can render one effectively dead as far as the rest of humanity is concerned, in reality the individual remains very much alive after such encounters with one's divine desire, at least in the form of what she refers to as the soul. In regards to Lacan's conception of the 'space between two deaths,' this quotation of Julian's describes a state which neatly dovetails with the aspect of this formulation that relates to a place where one is not yet dead biologically, but is so exempted from society as to be eradicated from its rolls.

The importance of such a zone, as mentioned above, to the subject's, and in this case to Julian's, ability to pursue her desire relentlessly lies in the fact that it is from just such a place of exile that the individual has burst through the

borders of the Real before—whether those boundaries take the form of a challenge posed to death in whatever format or some other sacred limit that desire required be traversed—and tasted *jouissance*. In the case of Julian’s close call with biological death, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, the very moment that she describes surrendering to its inevitability and deciding to give in to it and follow her desire past its bounds, she experiences a cessation of her suffering: ‘Then wened I sothly to have passed. And in this, sodenly all my paine was taken from me and I was as hole, and namely in the over parte of my body, as ever I was befor’ (*Revelation*, 3.29-31). Although what Julian receives in this instance is not exactly a burst of bliss, but rather the (incomplete) relief of a cessation of the extreme pain she had heretofore been experiencing, still it could be seen as a form of encouragement to continue to traverse the borders of death again, if needs be—as she does repeatedly throughout her texts—in pursuit of her desired God. In fact, it is only, I contend, from a ‘space between two deaths’ that Julian can do so time and again.

The site of Christ’s non-death, as depicted in the narration, represents in Julian’s texts an ideal example of the sort of ‘space between two deaths’ proposed by Lacan. This is because, by fixating on Jesus on the cross as she endures her near-death throes, Julian attains a modicum of that which she has so fervently been seeking, a greater affinity with her sought Lord, both through the traditional devotional method of sharing in his suffering in the Passion in a form of *imitatio Christi* as well as through the reception of words, sights and intimations delivered through these visions, messages that she will, by her own account spend the next several years parsing into even deeper communion with her desired God.

Over and again throughout the first third of her writings, in chapters four, five, eight, ten, twelve, sixteen, seventeen and twenty of *Revelation*, Julian returns to a visual and visceral focus on Christ's impending death. She describes in great and loving detail the flowing of blood, the drying of his skin, in short she delves deeply and unreservedly into the extraordinary torment that Jesus is enduring before her very eyes. And, as she does this, Julian periodically intersperses these descriptions with portrayals of her own mortal pangs, which appear to build up and subside in relation to the ebb and flow of Christ's own inexorable march towards what seems to be certain and unavoidable death. For instance, in the seventeenth chapter of *Revelation*, in the midst of her detailed descriptions of Jesus' agonising sufferings, Julian herself begins to experience discomfort, saying, 'Cristes paines filled me fulle of paines' (*Revelation*: 17.41). Furthermore, Julian explicitly goes on to state in the next sentence, that although Christ's Passion occurred only once in historical time, that she, Julian, in these visions, gets to imaginatively share in this torment over and over again: 'For I wiste welle he sufferede but onys, but as he wolde shewe it me and fille me with minde, as I had before desirede' (*Revelation*: 17.41-3). Through this medium, in her showings and one presumes in her repeated contemplative returns to them over the ensuing years, Julian keeps experiencing Jesus' Passion over and again. In this way she also continues to connect with her desired quantity or Thing.

Yet it seems to be in the very moment of anticipated culmination of all this suffering, the expected denouement of the Passion narrative, that Julian's desire draws closest to being fulfilled, at least in terms of Lacan's definition of the realization of this sort of desire or drive—the reception or experience of

jouissance, which he situates in the realm of the Real. The aspect of Christ's crucifixion story, at least in the way that Julian unfolds it, that eventually brings this encounter with *jouissance* about is actually the moment of what one is anticipating to be his death, the ending of all his torment through a final release in the form of a transition into bodily extinction.

However, in Julian's visions, as depicted in her texts, this usual resolution to Jesus' Passion takes an unusual swerve. In essence, Christ, when he comes right to the point of expiration, simply does not die. In Julian's words:

And I loked after the departing with alle my mightes and
wende to have seen the body alle dead. But I saw him not so.
And right in the same time that methought by seming that the
life might no lenger last, and the shewing of the ende behoved
nedes to be nye—sodenly, I beholding in the same crosse, he
changed in blissful chere (*Revelation*, 21.5-9).

So, instead of seeing Christ die as Julian expects, and as one would suspect that everyone aware of the story of the Passion would anticipate, Jesus instead goes right to the verge of death and then seemingly passes its borders, yet without actually physically expiring.

This curious non-death is signalled by a change in Christ's face which, at the moment when he was meant to die, suddenly transforms its expression from one of anguish into one suffused with bliss. From this fact it could be intimated that Julian is interpreting Jesus' transition from life to some other realm, perhaps the realm of the Real or death itself, as something productive of ecstasy. Furthermore, just as she has been following his lead all along, Julian appears to pursue Christ, yet again, in this his transgression of death. For,

directly after she describes witnessing the changing of his 'chere,' she exclaims, 'The changing of his blisseful chere changed mine' (*Revelation*, 21.9). And, just to be clear that the change this incursion into non-death or a zone beyond death has wrought is one just as blissful for Julian as it has been for Jesus, her desired Lord, she confirms that, due to this change, 'I was as glad and mery as it was possible' (*Revelation*, 21.9-10). Thus, pursuing Christ all the way up to and past the bounds of death itself has, by her own account, brought Julian to an experience of extraordinary pleasure. As Aers remarks upon this passage and its consequences for Julian, Jesus '*does not die* and [Julian] now encounters the sudden change of his appearance and experiences overwhelming joy.'⁸⁹ This transgression of death, or an ultimate limit, in pursuit of her desire for the Thing and the resulting reception of extraordinary pleasure bears great similarities to Lacan's notion of the access to *jouissance* afforded to those who, in search of the Thing, pass beyond the limits represented by the order of the Real. Just as passing beyond the borders of the Real produces, in Lacanian theory, the symbolic death of the individual due to her or his removal from the chain of signifiers, it would appear that Julian's sympathetic excursion into the space of Christ's non-death, in a version (or perhaps an inversion) of Lacan's concept, brings about her own brush with symbolic death. But this form of symbolic death not only delights Julian, but it also releases her back to the world of the living intact, rather than, in the Lacanian iteration of symbolic death, trapping her forever in a mute, empty, non-representational wasteland.

Mills offers support for this Lacanian reading of Julian's focus on Jesus' Passion in order to follow him, her desired quantity, beyond all limits and taste

⁸⁹ Aers, 'Humanity of Christ', p. 90.

bliss, when he states, 'her desire demands that she traverse the fantasy by transgressing the barrier to *jouissance*, and fusing imaginatively with Christ's body.'⁹⁰ Indeed, right after describing her experience of sharing in Jesus' suffering and the culmination of her vision of his Passion—the changing of his facial expression which stands in for what would normally have been his death—and declaring that this process and its pinnacle had brought her great joy. Julian goes on to explicitly connect the reception of ecstasy with her active and willing participation in Christ's torment and (non) death. She states:

I understode that we be now, in our lordes mening, in his
crosse with him in our paines and in our passion, dying. And
we, wilfully abiding in the same crosse, with his helpe and his
grace, into the last point, sodeynly he shalle change his chere to
us, and we... shalle alle be brought into joy (*Revelation*, 21.12-
16).

Thus, by consciously and willingly suffering and dying with Christ, Julian assures her 'evencristen,' one is granted salvation and bliss. Through her intentional merging with her beloved, in such closeness that she shares in the pain and agony of his Passion, Julian, at the moment of mortal transgression—'the last point' which in this case appears to represent a point in time that, whilst terminal (in the sense that it alludes to the Last Judgment) can also imaginatively, if temporarily, be experienced repeatedly prior to that final ending—is transported, by her Lord, into ecstasy.

Furthermore, by cognitively merging with Jesus' crucified body as it undergoes all the throes of suffering and torture that precede its expected

⁹⁰ Mills, 'Being Beaten', p. 124.

passage across the very threshold of death, Julian has shown her willingness to follow her desire wherever it may lead, even up to and past the borders of physical extinction.

Oddly enough, however, as we have seen, the torture-riddled path that Jesus (and thus Julian in her imagination) follows does not lead, in Julian's texts, to a depiction of traditional death—at least not in the way that Christ's expiration in the Passion is normally portrayed—with his soul leaving his body and then his removal from the cross and burial in a tomb, ready to await resurrection. I would like to suggest that this original treatment, this instance of an alternative ending to Christ's Passion, this non-death, works to create a sort of Lacanian version of a 'space between two deaths.' Jesus' non-death can be seen to act as such a site in that it enables Julian to approach and transgress death again and again and again by emulating Christ's torturous struggle on the cross, right up to the brink of death and then passing over with him into some mysterious realm, between this life and death, where joy or *jouissance* awaits.

Lacan comments on a scenario similar to the one Julian presents with Christ's non-death, when he opines on the writings of the Marquis de Sade, saying:

In the typical Sadean scenario, suffering doesn't lead the victim to the point where he is dismembered and destroyed.

It seems rather that the object of all the torture is to retain the capacity of being an indestructible support. Analysis shows clearly that the subject separates out a double of

himself who is made inaccessible to destruction, so as to
make it support... the play of pain... [in] a space of freedom.⁹¹

Therefore, using this Lacanian interpretation of Sade to shine a light on Julian's treatment of Christ, one can discern certain similarities. Namely that Jesus, no matter how tortured and maimed he might be described as being, continues always to remain viable as a means to access freedom or *jouissance* through pursuing him and his pain. This is possible because his non-death enables her to follow him time and again to the brink of extinction and over its edge into bliss and a death of sorts—even if it is only the symbolic death of the language-defined individual as s/he disappears into the ecstasy beyond the now-punctured borders of the Real.

Thus by preserving Christ's ever-dying and yet never-dead body in a form of unending stasis, Julian creates, in essence, an always culminating, yet never spent, portal through which she can access her overwhelming joy, in Lacanian terms seen as the pleasure-pain of *jouissance*. Through this gateway Julian can touch this *jouissance*, this essence of the desired Thing, time and again, simply by imaginatively merging with the torn, suffering and then ecstatic form of her desired Lord. In this way, Christ's body can be seen as an example of what Kay describes—when discussing Lacan's concept of the desired Thing as it manifests within cultural artefacts or socially revered people or phenomena—as, 'objects which, located against the death drive, become suspended in an "undead" state. They seem to have sublime bodies that are somehow exempted from ordinary mortality... such objects are said to be

⁹¹ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 261.

“between the two deaths”.⁹² Thus, according to this interpretation, Jesus’ non-death and his non-dead body with its now ‘blissful chere’ can be seen to fit the description of a Lacanian ‘space between two deaths,’ both in the example it sets as being suspended between realities and in its ability to transport the desiring subject into this same state, this realm beyond.

In her idiosyncratic portrayal of a famous death, one that she depicts as not so much avoided as oddly transcended or even transgressed, in a fashion that appears to culminate in or somehow stimulate joy, Julian seems to have designed a zone between two deaths that displays the aspect of Lacan’s concept of this site or no-place explicated by Gilbert in the following way:

This *entre-deux* is not an intermediate place or space (although that may act as a trigger or vessel), but the consciousness that the existence of plural distinct fields implies a further field external to any that can be delimited or identified. This further field may be considered a metaphysical dimension; Lacan bids us be wary of giving it that ontological status.⁹³

Therefore, this space between has the ability to function as a catalyst that makes the subject aware of something greater, a place where one’s desire for the Thing can be accessed, and then enables one to catapult oneself repeatedly across any number of forbidden barriers in search of this desired Thing, in pursuit of apprehensions of *jouissance*. However, according to Gilbert, Lacan is

⁹² Kay, *Žižek*, p. 54. For more on the role of martyrs, such as Julian’s always dying, but never-dead Christ, as sublime bodies standing in for *Das Ding*, see: Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, pp. 216-7.

⁹³ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 12.

cautious about imparting any transcendent or mystical qualities or properties to this space or zone.

Instead, to Lacan, this repeated puncturing of the borders of the Real, this continual chasing of one's desire into, beyond and from a space between two deaths, will, in actuality, more often than not, produce inherently uncomfortable, disruptive and, on some level, destructive results, even though it may also eventually effect positive transformation. This is because entry into the Real and encounters with *jouissance*, in Lacanian thought, remove a subject from the chain of signifiers which, though they may limit an individual, nevertheless provide the only means of self-definition and thus, for all practical purposes, existence available to human beings. It is for this reason that Lacan describes the register of the Real and what is evoked behind it as, 'that barrier beyond which the analytical Thing is to be found, the place where the inaccessibility of the object as object of *jouissance* is organized.'⁹⁴ So, according to this conclusion of Lacan's, once one transgresses this border—effectively temporarily erasing her- or himself from the annals of existence—one inevitably discovers that the truest form or essence of the object of one's desire, the Thing that one has relentlessly pursued for all this distance and through all this pain, proves to be irrevocably beyond reach, or more accurately, beyond the reach of language. One simply cannot remain in the realm of the Real, outside of the chain of signifiers, for any length of time and still remain a viable communicative and, thus, social human being. Thus, according to Lacanian theory as presently constituted, piercing the Real in pursuit of this Thing—whilst it may provide one with a taste of painfully acute, and perhaps

⁹⁴ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 203.

transformative, pleasure—can never permanently satisfy one's ontological longing by affording one uninterrupted and lasting access to the sought desired quantity.

As Gilbert remarks on this topic: '*jouissance*, the ultimate pleasure sought by each human subject under an irreducibly personal form, involves a kind of dying—temporary self-dissolution if not literal bodily death—which itself is only part of the vicious pleasure of destruction.'⁹⁵ This temporary death, the type of which Julian appears to be experiencing, through following her desired Thing up to and past all limits of death, utilising the motif of Christ's non-culminating death, can result, therefore in another sort of extinction, according to Lacanian theory, the temporary (though perhaps cumulative) obliteration of a sense of self or identity. As Irigaray explains this phenomenon: 'In such ex-tasies, [the individual] risks losing herself or at least seeing the self-assurance of her self-identity-as-same fade away.'⁹⁶ Lacan is aware that the effort and consequences of obeying such a drive to obtain one's desire—as it takes one beyond a level of extinction, such as an eradication of the individual from language or past the traditional forms of death already described—might seem to be, in the end, simply not worth it.

He sums up this position when he offers these final comments on the steep expense Antigone eventually paid in order to chase her desire for the Thing to its limits and beyond and the reason why this sort of behaviour is not recommended for everyone. He states that the lesson to take from Antigone's example is that:

⁹⁵ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 14.

⁹⁶ Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 192.

One knows what it costs to go forward in a given direction,
and if one doesn't go that way, one knows why. One can even
sense that if, in one's accounts with one's desire, one isn't
exactly in the clear, it is because one couldn't do any better,
for that's not a path one can take without paying a price. The
spectator has his eyes opened to the fact that even for one
who goes to the end of his desire, all is not a bed of roses.⁹⁷

For Lacan, therefore, hunting one's desired Thing beyond all limits, past the
borders of the Real and into death, itself, in every or any form, represents an
extreme path, one that he admits is not going to appeal to nor be advisable for
all subjects.

Yet, nevertheless, as Holsinger asserts, to Lacan, 'The end of desire is
annihilation.'⁹⁸ This is because, despite the difficulties and even possible
symbolic eradication that one encounters in pursuing one's radical desire, still,
to Lacan, this pursuit affords the only means for the subject to even begin to
recuperate the sense of lost wholeness that gapes at the centre of the human
psyche. Whilst this sense of union may inevitably be technically impossible to
restore, the failure to even attempt a recuperation signals not only a giving up
on one's ontological desire, but also a surrendering of the very imperative that
makes us human and that drives us past the alternative inertia, which is, after
all nothing more than a form of numbness akin to a living death.⁹⁹

Julian appears, from the evidence provided in her texts, to agree with
Lacan about the advisability of unceasingly paying fealty to one's devotion or

⁹⁷ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 323.

⁹⁸ Holsinger, *Premodern Condition*, p. 93.

⁹⁹ This concept will be discussed in greater detail in the conclusion to this thesis.

desire. Because, by traversing all boundaries, up to and including (near) death, in service to her longing for God, she seems to have reaped mainly positive results. From her report, in chapter fifty of *A Revelation*, which suggests that she kept revisiting her showings constantly throughout the years, it is safe to assume that she kept reliving these near-death and between-death and presumably beyond-death experiences over and again, as she contemplated the visions that were wrought from a run-up to death and sustained by a constant return to Jesus' non-death, her own 'space between the deaths.' Indeed, the fact that the description of Christ's slow, excruciating progress towards death is much more detailed and takes almost twice as long to depict in the Long Text (230 lines, chapters 16-21) than it does in the Short Text (125 lines, sections 10-11) suggests that over the long years of meditation spent in the tomblike enclosure of her anchorhold, Julian returned again and again and again to the lead up to and swerve away from Jesus' physical extinction, that represents in this reading her own 'space between two deaths.'

Perhaps it is this familiarity with death and the space between that led Julian to remark, 'thus may no man se God and live after, that is to sey, in this dedely life' (*Revelation*, 43.45). After all, if Julian entered her visionary experience through her deathbed and accessed the *jouissance* of connection with her beloved through the almost and just barely averted or diverted death of Christ—an incarnate form of her desire that she has been following through his long, agonising lead-up to this non-death—then surely it would make sense for her to conclude that the only way to see God is by undergoing some form of death. In this interpretation, the surpassing of the borders of mortality would represent a transformation or transition that removes one from one form of

life, the everyday earthly sort perhaps, and presumably places one in another locale altogether. In this explanation, it could be posited that Julian— when referring to an alternative form of existence that one who has seen God must enter, a place beyond ‘deadly life’—is describing a sort of ‘space between two deaths’ that would track well with the one posited by Lacanian theory.

Yet, in Julian’s case, unlike in that of Antigone’s as described by Lacan, the facing of double death and any occupation of the zone between two deaths that this might require most certainly does serve a purpose and is worth the effort. Whilst Lacan sees a surrender to chasing one’s desires beyond all limits as potentially destructive, declaring that one ‘has to pay for that mystical operation with a pound of flesh.’¹⁰⁰ Julian’s compulsion to follow her desire beyond the limits of death itself, and repeatedly so, appears to have been rewarded with not only the feeling of joy that accompanied her (and Christ’s) ‘blissful chere’, but also profound theological understandings. To Julian it seems that the traversing of death in any form—even one could surmise in the Lacanian mode of piercing the register of the Real—in pursuit of her sought beloved was worth the price. This conclusion appears to be supported by her declaration that:

we shall die in longing for love. And than shall we alle come
into our lord, ourselves clearly knowing and God fulsomly
having; and we endlessly be alle had in God, him verily seying
and fulsomly feling, and him gostely hering, and him
delectably smelling, and him sweetly swelwing (43.38-43).

¹⁰⁰ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 322.

Clearly, based on this statement, Julian seems to consider her encounters with death in the name of following her desire far from onerous or frightening or pointless. Instead, these words appear to conclude quite the opposite—that this traversing of death in pursuit of love has resulted for her in a communion with the divine so full and complete as to swallow her whole and delight her senses in a manner surely akin to a particularly well-articulated form of *jouissance*.

Certainly Julian's commitment to chasing and perhaps merging with or apprehending her desired divinity never appears to flag or wane over the course of her works or her life. Based on the evidence provided by her two texts which spanned at least twenty years and more, Julian never ceased longing and searching and presumably eagerly enduring and welcoming death in all its forms, over and over again. Indeed, far from appearing dissuaded by her entry into the 'space between two deaths,' Julian's writings depict the unfolding of an ever-intensifying longing for God that never appears to waver or diminish.

No matter how close she gets to her beloved, Julian always seems to want to get closer. As she herself phrases this phenomenon, 'And wele I wot, the more the soule seeth of God, the more it desyereth him' (*Revelation*, 43.21-22). This constant presence of what Hollywood refers to as, 'endless, ceaseless, illimitable desire,'¹⁰¹ in Julian's texts is something that I will touch upon in the concluding section of this thesis, in the light of Lacan's formulation of desire for desire. In addition, the similar and perhaps complementary ideas and indeed empirical findings which Lacan and Julian harbour and display on the topic of following and perhaps attaining one's desire—for God or the Thing—will be further explored in the upcoming conclusion.

¹⁰¹ Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy*, p. 278.

Conclusion: Desire for Desire

To conclude this thesis I would like to summarise what I have contended about what Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has done to help explain and illumine certain aspects within the texts of Julian of Norwich. I also intend to suggest that by reading certain aspects of Julian's and Lacan's works together, it is possible to open a dialogue between their ideas that might prove to be mutually informing.

I will begin by summing up what, according to this project, Lacan's formulations have to offer to a literary critical exploration of specific elements within Julian's texts. As I specified in the introduction to this thesis, I have chosen to pursue a psychoanalytical approach to my exploration of Julian's texts because psychoanalytical and specifically, in this case, Lacanian theory provide a set of concepts concerning universal elements of human nature and behaviour, though affected by historical conditions, which enables me to shed light on certain aspects of Julian's works. More specifically, as was also discussed in the introduction, a psychoanalytical approach is especially useful in helping to explain the motivations behind certain of the particularly medieval mystical manifestations of Julian's devotion—such as her request for a deathly illness in order to attain some sort of closeness with Christ. Lacanian theory can also aid in the translation of matters of religious faith or transcendent belief to secular audiences through the agency of certain of its observations and formulations on the human psyche. This facility of psychoanalysis can be particularly profitable in a modern and scientific era in which ideas about the transcendent or the non-tangible, not to mention the

supernatural or mystical, can often be dismissed for lack of empirical proof, as well as because of scepticism or even distaste about religious, spiritual or other forms of faith. Watson attests to the fact that many critics approach such topics, at least within the specific area of Christian medieval mystical writing, with preconceived notions. He states:

medieval contemplative writing is... an often unconsciously politicized field, which readers with even a residually Christian background approach with more latent knowledge than they may realize, and which scholarship... has trouble analysing without prejudice (that most telling indicator of our collective acts of intellectual repression).¹

Whether or not one brings a pronounced predetermined mindset to the interpretation of a text of this sort, it definitely would not be uncommon for a contemporary critic to encounter a degree of difficulty in figuring out how properly to address the unfamiliar and impossible to verify subjects, which often form the basis of medieval mystical writings. As Watson states:

Mystics are... in a special category for literary critics. Since most of the modes of literature that critics traditionally encounter are considered forms of fiction, the manner in which mystical writing fuses two categories which it insists we treat as *fact*, the personal and the transcendent, renders it especially problematic and interesting.²

¹ Nicholas Watson, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Mysticism*, ed. Samuel Fanous and Vincent Gillespie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-28, (p. 3).

² Watson, *Rolle*, p. 1.

Psychoanalytical theory, originating with Freud and becoming refined with the linguistic and symbolic accretions of Lacan, offers one avenue, a particularly fruitful one for the purposes of this study, to aid in reducing the unfamiliarity of medieval spiritual practice and ideas by offering concepts which help to contextualise the beliefs and motivations at play in terms of a more universal understanding of the human psyche.

Even some of those critics who have disagreed about the potential dangers posed by the totalising effects that such an approach can bring have had to admit that psychoanalytic theory can be helpful in discussing and even explaining topics that might otherwise seem ineffable. For instance, Patterson, during the course of his essay warning against the dangers of utilising psychoanalytic tenets in literary criticism in general and medieval literary criticism specifically, acknowledges that:

Freud restored to modernity some of the mystery that the disenchantments of rationality were threatening to strip away forever. In a world in which everything is potentially knowable to instrumental reason, psychoanalysis can satisfy a Romantic desire for a realm of deep meaning that is unknown and perhaps even unknowable.³

Whilst psychoanalytic theory does not help rationally to prove that which is beyond empirical proof (and has no intention of doing so), it does nonetheless offer a key of sorts, a means to examine certain previously inexplicable areas within medieval spiritual texts, for example, through the prism of human

³ Patterson, 'Pardoner', p. 640.

development and thought, rather than through the often opaque glass of faith or religious belief.

In regards to Lacan's theoretical contributions to this endeavour, James DiCenso states, 'Lacan's work is particularly useful for addressing the complex relations between subjectivity, symbol systems, and human engagement with the external world; it offers tools for an insightful and fruitful psychoanalytic approach to religiosity as an orientation of these relations.'⁴ For the purposes of this thesis, Lacan's formulation on desire as a central factor in the motivations and thought of individual subjects has provided a methodology to help explain some of Julian's self-described behaviours and conclusions in a way that not only takes medieval faith-based practices into consideration, but that also uses these medieval mystical features to point out and explore the existence of potential similarities in thought and behaviour between medieval and modern subjects. By revealing common ground between Julian's desire, and the relentless way in which she follows it, and Lacan's theory on desire, it is possible to posit that she might have been driven by many of the same impulses and inner mandates that still compel subjects today.

As I have illustrated throughout this thesis, some of the actions and ideas that Julian writes about in her texts—which might otherwise have seemed somewhat unfamiliar to those unaccustomed to the more colourful expressions or manifestations of medieval pietistic devotion, as well as to those sceptical about the notion of a transcendent divine—can begin to make more sense and thus become opened up and receptive to wider analysis, when viewed through the prism of Lacan's conception of desire for the Thing, as well

⁴ DiCenso, 'Symbolism and Subjectivity', p. 48.

as certain connected tenets that stem from that principal theory. Thus, Julian's overpowering yearning to apprehend her coveted Lord, and the subsequent behaviour and understandings that this occasions according to her texts, can start to come into sharper focus, from a postmodern perspective, when seen through the lens of Lacan's concept that each human being, no matter in what culture or era they might belong, is drawn to search for something or rather some Thing that s/he identifies as the one element that will fill a gaping lack and restore him or her to completion. As Lacan puts it:

desire is nothing other than that which supports an unconscious theme, the very articulation of that which roots us in a particular destiny, and that destiny demands insistently that the debt be paid, and desire keeps coming back, keeps returning, and situates us once again in a given track, the track of something that is specifically our business.⁵

When seen from this angle, Julian's self-described longing for God, a desire that is both incessant and obsessive, driving her to transgress boundary after boundary in search of its fulfilment, begins to appear less foreign and hard to grasp or explain. Indeed, it is precisely because of the ability of Lacanian theory to distinguish exactly which of Julian's behavioural features and ideas emanate from and belong exclusively to the alterity of the past, that one is able to isolate and identify those behaviours and ideas which are similar to, and perhaps are shared in common with, modes and practices of desire occurring in and as manifested by individuals from different periods and cultures. Lacan, himself, appears to have utilised his conceptions on desire in a similar diagnostic

⁵ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 319.

fashion not only to examine what thought or pathology was particular to the Middle Ages, but also, therefore, by a sort of process of elimination, retroactively and reciprocally to pinpoint what was common to both the medieval and postmodern subjects. Discussing an instance in which Lacan, in *Seminar VII* (the main source of the particular Lacanian theories from which I have drawn during this thesis), used this methodology as part of his famous exploration of a pseudo-erotic and scatological courtly love poem, in order to explicate his theory on the impossibility of one's desire, Holsinger states, 'Lacan reads "Lady Ena" as a kind of ethical mirror in which his auditors are to view the alterity of the medieval even while recognizing in this trashy bit of medievalism the lingering Thing at the core of modernity.'⁶ Thus, in a similar way, Lacan's formulation on desire for the Thing has the ability to reveal elements within Julian's mystical search that display similarities with or connections to other cross-temporal thought or behaviours, even contemporary ones. One such possible similar feature, for instance, shared by all those who refuse to give ground on their desire is the unwavering compulsion to attain something that the subject has claimed to experience, something that s/he has decided that s/he simply cannot live without.

Gilbert makes it clear that, despite the societal or temporal milieu in which a subject might be situated, this central motivating tenet in Lacan's theory of human behaviour and thought still holds true. She states, 'In spite of his emphasis on the singular form it takes for each individual, Lacan's notion of *jouissance* as driving every human subject without exception beyond society is

⁶ Holsinger, *Premodern Condition*, p. 86. The discussion on the courtly love poem to which Holsinger is referring is from: Lacan, *Ethics*, pp. 162-3.

itself an instance of natural law'⁷—something that, therefore, can be experienced by both medieval and modern subjects. The facility and capability of Lacanian theory to open up these reciprocal avenues of communication between medieval and postmodern thought and behaviour creates a tool for hermeneutical and epistemological exploration, one which Holsinger claims that Lacan, himself, implemented as a central stratagem in laying out his case in *Ethics*. Holsinger states that:

the historical argument propounded in Lacan's *Ethics* places the medieval at the service of an ethical interventionism... medievalism represents [for Lacan] less a reserve of isolated historical artifacts for occasional delectation than a spectrum of historical variety casting multi-hued beams on the cold surfaces of modernity.⁸

In the same way, by utilising certain aspects of Lacan's theory of desire to examine and explore specific elements of Julian's works, it is possible not only to gain a better understanding of Julian's medieval mystical ideas and practices, but also possibly to comment upon and forge connections between similar thought and behaviour in other eras and cultural mileux, including the contemporary.

However, whilst I find this ability of Lacan's conception of desire for the Thing to be a very helpful quality in my attempts better to illumine for postmodern audiences certain of the ideas, actions and conclusions which Julian writes about in her texts, I remain aware, as I discussed in the

⁷ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 22.

⁸ Holsinger, *Premodern Condition*, p. 62.

introduction, of the wariness with which many critics continue to regard what they consider to be the totalising effects of Lacanian theory. Patterson sums up this line of thought when he worries about the potential that psychoanalytic tenets possess to impose ‘a new creed, immune to empirical critique’⁹ upon the more verifiable and, in his opinion, historically accurate field of historicist literary criticism. Yet, as I also touched upon in the introduction to this thesis, this concern and the traditional dispute it has contributed to in literary critical circles has begun to diminish as, perhaps, more and more scholars recognise the valuable potential that psychoanalytical theory can bring to textual exploration and illumination.

Indeed, in many cases, what may have once been a schismatic divide between historicist and psychoanalytical approaches to literary criticism, especially in the medieval field, has now begun to resolve into smaller, at times territorial, disagreements about the relative importance of historical accuracy versus theoretical utility or agency. Of one of these more minor disputes—in which Aers initially criticised (in 1991) an essay by Fradenburg for its utilisation of psychoanalytic precepts (in an attempt to examine political realities in late-medieval Scotland) and then (in 1996) cited the very same essay in order to praise Fradenburg for her employment of Freudian tenets in a medievalist literary critical study—Scala opines, ‘what really seems to disturb Aers is the lack of attention to medieval conscious concerns rather than the transhistorical connections drawn by psychoanalytical theory.’¹⁰ Therefore, according to Scala’s assessment, the true reason for Aers’ objection, in one

⁹ Patterson, ‘Pardoner’, p. 640.

¹⁰ Scala, ‘Historicists’, p. 113.

instance, to psychoanalytic criticism of medieval literature (especially in light of his later apparent change of opinion on the exact same essay and its methodology) might just be his worry that the actual historical conditions and aspects depicted within these texts could suffer neglect if scholars and readers focus exclusively or at least too attentively on the totalising tenets offered by psychoanalytic theory. However, if this truly represents the lingering concern at the root of Aers' semi-retracted objection, then it should be allayed by the conscientious and theoretically targeted manner in which Lacan carefully noted and took into account historical circumstances and features in his examinations of medieval texts. As Labbie points out:

The overwhelming number of his citations of medieval theologians, philosophers, scientists, and poets combines to render Lacan's theories of the unconscious and language... a complex theory or (anti)philosophy, by which we may locate evidence of the real existence and performance of the unconscious in the Middle Ages.¹¹

Lacanian theory is invested in and relies upon an accurate historicist approach to the medieval, in order truly to exemplify the instantiation of his universal unconscious, revealed by desire, within the subjects of the Middle Ages and the present.

It is helpful to my particular project to utilise a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach because it opens the way for an exploration of Julian's medieval mystical texts that both enables me to situate her actions, experiences and ideas within the era from which they were spawned and also

¹¹ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 18.

simultaneously to locate in the same behaviour and thought a motivational factor—radical desire—which might possibly, after taking account of historical factors, manifest cross-temporally and cross-culturally. Indeed, Lacan explores his psychoanalytical theory on desire for the Thing—which addresses a type of human behaviour that he clearly has encountered in contemporary subjects—by discussing examples of this sort of desire found in the writings of medieval subjects, such as courtly poets and medieval mystics. The successful ability to show such similarities in motivation, behaviour and ideas across eras relies upon consistently being respectful of and taking into consideration the effects which differing historical conditions would necessarily produce in subjects from different eras and cultures. Thus, the use of a Lacanian psychoanalytical methodology, which accounts for and takes into consideration the different influences wrought upon a subject by temporal and cultural conditions, enables this thesis to examine Julian's apparent motivations and behaviours from the perspective of a theory of human formational desire that could point out certain similarities or shared characteristics that may be exhibited cross-culturally or cross-temporally.

Thus—returning to Aers apparent lingering mistrust of certain aspects of a Lacanian psychoanalytical approach—if his worry truly was predicated on a Lacanian lack of respect for medieval concerns, and if this anxiety is representative of any residual uncertainty or resistance that literary critics might harbour towards the utilisation of psychoanalytic concepts within their field, then it is not surprising, based on the available evidence of Lacan's theories, practices and intentions, that the debate is cooling and, in fact, should dissipate even further. Holsinger offer his assessment of this point and posits a

possible outcome of the demise of this longstanding critical conflict, when he states:

As theory continues its steady migration from critical provocation to the hallowed status of the primary source, we may find new and unexpected answers to many of the current disputes over the historical shape of our disciplines in the very real historical preoccupations that informed some of theory's own most pressing engagements to the past.¹²

Certainly, in this thesis I have tried diligently always to respect and accurately represent the empirical conditions and facts inherent in Julian's medieval texts, at the same time as I have utilised Lacanian psychoanalytical conceptions to help illuminate what I contend to be certain universal aspects of human behaviour and thought at play within these same works. That this sort of approach is not only achievable but also more and more common can be seen in the recent medievalist literary critical projects of scholars such as Kay who, as part of a recent study, claims that she is using a technique that involves, 'working between the contradictions of twelfth-century thought and those of Lacanian analysis.'¹³ In this way, among other aims, she attempts to link 'the psychoanalytic understanding of love, the cultivation of contradiction by medieval texts, and the development of the literary object in the later twelfth century.'¹⁴ Clearly Kay is not concerned that her use of psychoanalytical tenets will diminish or detract from an accurate portrayal of any empirical, historical conditions inherent in these medieval texts. Indeed, Kay's larger point seems to

¹² Holsinger, *Premodern Condition*, p. 6.

¹³ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, p. 39.

¹⁴ Kay, *Courtly Contradictions*, p. 260.

be that both literary objects and Lacanian analysis are fraught with contradictions that cannot simply be resolved through empiricism or fidelity to a putative historical truth.

In his look at the responses to pain and physical torture as exemplified in medieval representations of the gruesome scenes of saints' martyrdom, Mills draws upon psychoanalytical theories and terminology to aid in explaining that, whilst pain is fundamentally experienced and expressed based on historical and cultural conditions, still there are some ways in which elements of medieval attitudes towards and depictions of pain continue to resonate in and help to form modern approaches to and understandings of the subject.¹⁵

It seems fair to conclude, therefore, that it is eminently possible to utilise a psychoanalytical methodological approach to help solve or explain certain elements within medieval texts, whilst still maintaining a very high level of historical accuracy. Furthermore, indeed, I contend that the very fealty to and maintenance of historicist accuracy is crucial to attaining the optimal outcome of a Lacanian psychoanalytical theoretical approach to a medieval (or, for that matter, any) literary critical study.

At this juncture, I would like to address why such a strategy, when carried out carefully, can not only foster a greater understanding of the ideas and concepts in, for instance, the medieval writings of a mystic such as Julian of Norwich, but can also, in a reciprocal process, create greater knowledge and awareness about modern ways of thought and behaviour through the study of these medieval texts. Mills lays out, as part of his reading on medieval representations of pain, his belief in the potential efficacy and benefits, in this

¹⁵ Mills, 'Being Beaten'.

specific vein, that can arise as a by-product or even a central, predetermined result of using a psychoanalytical approach to help illumine aspects within medieval texts. He states, 'while... one should not underestimate the meaning-laden and culturally specific components of corporeal sensation, such a historicizing project in no way precludes analysis of the psychic and aesthetic *connections* between medieval and modern concepts of pain.'¹⁶ Thus, in using psychoanalytic theory to address his study's particular focus on medieval notions of pain, Mills is also very concerned with and interested in discerning and pointing out the connections or similarities between those earlier incidences and experiences of human suffering and those that we find today. He also is interested in probing possible continuities between medieval and modern that could help draw attention to different timelines in history that do not necessarily conform to conventional periodisation. Psychoanalytic theory, with its specific formulations on and concerns with pain and the human psyche, perhaps uniquely, affords him the ability to point out these continuities and to find and illumine the connections in thought, motivation and response between human beings who are situated within very different times and cultures.

This particular literary critical thesis has also found it useful to draw upon the capability which Lacanian psychoanalytic theory has been able to provide to be able not only to shed light on certain tendencies and ideas from the past but also to identify similarities and affinities between these medieval tendencies and ideas and modern behavioural patterns and modes of thought. Thus, whilst primarily using Lacan's formulations on desire for the Thing to help illumine certain aspects within Julian's descriptions of her yearning for

¹⁶ Mills, 'Being Beaten', pp. 118-9.

God, I also intend, in the process, not only to render Julian's ideas and behaviours more accessible to modern readers, but also to point out a certain shared or common ground between Julian's medieval modes of thought and action and those of subjects today. In this way, Julian's texts can become not only more comprehensible to modern audiences, but additionally they can begin to have more relevance and resonance in this era as well. From this angle, Lacanian psychoanalytical theory can aid in creating a bridge that both allows modern readers better to access and comprehend Julian's works and concepts and also enables Julian's texts to cross the divide of different cultures and times in order to demonstrate the existence of certain connections between medieval and modern thought and behaviour—especially in regards to radical desire and its effects upon human beliefs, motivation and ideas.

The Opportunity for Dialogue between Julian of Norwich and Jacques Lacan

This thesis has attempted to prove that Lacan's formulations on desire, and specifically desire for the Thing, can better help to explain some aspects of Julian's mystical texts by providing a means to view her thought and actions, in terms of an understanding of the human psyche and development that demonstrates common, shared features across eras, whilst accounting for differences in historical circumstances. I would now like to suggest that, when read together, certain aspects of Lacanian theory and elements of Julian's texts have something to contribute to each other. Specifically, I posit that several of the conclusions and experiences described in Julian's texts, when seen in relation to Lacan's conception of desire for the Thing, have the capacity to offer

evidence of a cross-temporal manifestation of his theories. According to Labbie, the ongoing, though diminishing conflict between medievalists who resist the use of theory and those who embrace it, stems, at least in part, from the fact that, 'scholarship continues to resist a consideration of the literary text as a model by which to read theory, rendering rare any analysis wherein mutual implication works.'¹⁷ In this conclusion, I intend to take the opposite approach. Rather than simply using Lacanian theory better to comprehend and explain Julian's thought and behaviour, as I have done throughout this thesis, I will now also attempt to utilise the understandings that this endeavour has produced, in order to take a closer look at Lacan's conceptions.

Labbie speaks about such a process, when she discusses Shoshana Felman's psychoanalytical literary critical approach, which relies upon Felman's belief that, according to Labbie:

literature and psychoanalysis need to find a discourse or discourses that enable them to exist as disciplines that inform each other... *implication* between two texts or ideas [must] supplement *application*, the imposition of one text or idea onto another.¹⁸

In order to accomplish such a feat, Felman suggests that:

What the literary critic might thus wish is to initiate a real exchange, to engage in a real *dialogue* between literature and psychoanalysis, as between two different modes of knowledge. Such a dialogue has to take place outside of the master-slave

¹⁷ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 8.

pattern, which does not allow for true dialogue, being, under the banner of competence, a unilateral monologue of psychoanalysis *about* literature.¹⁹

In this conclusion, I will attempt to create a channel of dialogue between the texts of Julian and the theory of Lacan, in order to explore some of Lacan's conceptions in a different light and from another vantage point, one offered by the experiences and conclusions contained in the works of a medieval mystic.

In order to explain exactly what I mean by this, it will first be helpful briefly to recap the parts of Lacan's theory on desire for the Thing which are both relevant to Julian's texts and which her texts have the ability reciprocally to illuminate. In particular I am referring to Lacan's formulation that desire is fundamental to the foundation, development and maintenance of all subjects and subject behaviour because it stems from and is directed towards filling in the initial gap or lack that opens up within each psyche once a subject perceives her or his distinction from others or the Other which starts at the mirror phase and develops rapidly during the subsequent entry into signification. Labbie describes this Lacanian concept of the ontological gap as, 'the empty center of desire [that] circulates within language and within the subject as she exists in language.'²⁰ The Thing, which can manifest within an object or series of metonymic objects that Lacan collectively deems *objet petit a*, is therefore, within this aspect of Lacanian formulation, theoretically that which the subject believes will return her or him to a state of unity, a condition of pre-linguistic

¹⁹ Shoshana Felman, 'To Open the Question', in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Shoshana Felman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 5-10, (p. 6).

²⁰ Labbie, *Lacan's Medievalism*, p. 11.

wholeness which was lost once s/he abruptly entered into the Symbolic and Imaginary realms and became defined, and limited, by the demands and concepts of others.²¹

Of this Thing, this root cause of human desire, Lacan says, ‘this *Ding* was there from the beginning... it was the first thing that separated itself from everything the subject began to name and articulate.’²² Thus, it alone maintains that sense of oneness which language, with its limiting, defining and ultimately separating qualities, stripped away from the subject.

That this Thing—which so represents the restoration of all that one may consciously or more likely unconsciously feel, according to Lacanian theory, that he or she lacks—could approximate to the divine, or the answer to some ontological longing for a supreme creator and answer to all one’s prayers in certain religious or cultural contexts is not surprising. Labbie describes the ultimate desire of the psyche in the following way: ‘the goal of the unconscious, its desire to fulfil itself, aims toward a particular point, an inexpressible, often unknowable point, but a point that resembles the tendency toward perfection (seen here as equilibrium).’²³ Indeed this entropic and magnetic point of perfection, which restores equilibrium or wholeness, is exactly the role that I have suggested that the desired Thing plays in my Lacanian-centred examination of Julian’s texts, where I have explicitly and implicitly equated her longing for God with Lacan’s concept of desire for the Thing. And even though Lacan often avowed his atheism and openly rejected any literal association of

²¹ Huguette Glowinski, Zita M. Marks and Sara Murphy, eds, *A Compendium of Lacanian Terms* (London: Free Association Books, 2001), p. 58.

²² Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 83.

²³ Labbie, *Lacan’s Medievalism*, p. 30.

the Thing with a divine entity or transcendent being, still it is not a leap to draw parallels of this nature. In fact that is exactly what Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Reinhard Lupton appear to be intimating that Lacan himself has done when they state that, ‘Lacan extends the monotheistic project of thinking singularity by insisting that “there is something of One’ [*il y a de l’un*]—not the self-identical One of Greek logic, mathematics, and cosmology, but the One of a violent rupture that creates subjects and their worlds around a void, an *un* that un-does the primacy it speaks.’²⁴ Thus, at root, Lacan’s theory of desire for the Thing, as I have recapped here and as it has been utilised throughout this thesis, speaks about an originary splitting in the human psyche that craves to be resolved and restored to unity through the attainment of this desired Thing, which resides in the extra-linguistic realm of the Real. Also, due to its ability to answer all prayers by returning one to a state of perfect unitive bliss—which Lacan refers to as *jouissance*, though he sees it as more painful than pleasurable due to its extreme intensity and jarring brevity—the Thing can approximate, for those of a religious bent, whatever version of divinity they might choose, or be culturally predisposed, to worship.

Additionally, since this initial rupture occurs and is experienced within each individual human psyche itself, requiring that any solution to mending it would need perfectly to fit the gap that has been created in the split, the Thing or desired quantity would have to constitute an exact match to the lack or void left within. Of necessity, therefore all radical desire, desire for the Thing, according to this Lacanian formulation, must emanate from a gap within each subject and be directed towards the ideal puzzle piece that can perfectly fill the

²⁴ Reinhard and Reinhard Lupton, ‘The Subject of Religion’, pp. 71-2.

hole that was created in the initial splitting. This is the theoretical basis for Lacan's concept of desire for desire. This conception offers an illuminating perspective on Julian's growing certainty, as exemplified in her declaration that God resides within her soul, that the answer to all her prayers, her unceasing longing can only be found by looking within herself, the source of both her desire and, increasingly, the locus of its eventual fulfilment. She expresses this realisation when she states, 'therfore it longeth properly to us, both by kinde and by grace, to long and desyer with alle oure mightes to know ourselfe, in which full knowing we shall verely and clerely know oure God in fulhede of endlesse joy' (*Revelation*: 46.10-12). By following her desire ostensibly for God, therefore, Julian appears to arrive at the conclusion, as discussed in detail in chapter two of this thesis, that this sought divine presence actually can be found within her own self or her own soul. Lacan's formulation of desire for the Thing, as being nothing other than a longing to restore a psychic sense of wholeness or unity that was abruptly lost during each subject's entry into the linguistic limitations imposed by the chain of signifiers, offers a plausible way to understand and explain this impulse and its resolution in Julian's texts.

Julian, therefore, like Augustine, Porete, Eckhart and other mystical writers, as discussed in chapter two of this thesis, eventually arrives at a juncture in her spiritual seeking where her desire for God leads her to the understanding that that for which she is actually longing resides within and emanates from her own soul, or as Lacan might deem it, her own (ruptured) psyche.

What is distinctive about this realisation in Julian's texts, as opposed to in the writings of other medieval mystical writers, such as those mentioned

above, who arrived at the same conclusion, is that it is clearly reached as the result of a well-laid-out path of desire, which the reader is invited to follow along step by step. By contrast, Porete, in her allegorical conversation between characters such as the Soul, Love and the Church, simply arrives at and presents to the reader the conclusion that the soul and God are one. Without explaining how she has reached this profound realisation, Porete's character Love simply and imperiously declares: 'þe soule be in God and God in þe soule, of him, bi him, in þis beyng bi/ diuine sittinge.'²⁵ Similarly, as part of his sermons and treatises, Eckhart over and again proclaims the undifferentiated unity of the human soul with the divine. And, just as in Porete's example, when Eckhart makes a pronouncement, in reference to the union of the human soul with God, such as: 'Between man and God there is not only no distinction, there is no multiplicity either—there is nothing but one',²⁶ he does so without showing the path he has taken to arrive at this destination. Thus, although both Porete and Eckhart espouse similar positions to Julian's about the human soul representing the goal of spiritual seeking, the desired divinity, they both do so without giving any clear indication as to how they have come to this recognition.

Julian's texts, on the other hand, arrive at a similar destination to the mystics above only after showing in detail the circuitous twists and turns of the process that has brought her there. As has been demonstrated in this thesis, Julian's texts describe her following her desire wherever it may lead her. And this devotional drive has proven time and again that it does not respect nor fixate upon any particular appearance or characteristic or mode which her

²⁵ Doiron, 'Porete *The Mirror*', p. 265.

²⁶ McGinn, *Mystical Thought*, p. 197. McGinn is quoting and translating from the *Predigt* of Meister Eckhart, Pr. 40 (DW 2: 274.10-12).

sought beloved might discard or assume. As such, it seems safe to say that Julian follows her desire itself, much more than any specific form or shape of that which might momentarily appear to contain or embody her desired. This seems to match perfectly with Žižek's summation of Lacanian ethics, which he equates with each individual's commitment to follow her or his desire—a contention that he expresses when he states that, '[Lacanian] ethics... deals with my consistency in relation to myself, my fidelity to my own desire.'²⁷ This is precisely what Julian's works illustrate her doing—consistently and unswervingly following her own individual and uniquely personal (though culturally and religiously filtered) desire or devotion.

Furthermore, Julian's texts take the reader on every step of her desire-directed journey, which so aptly can be illumined by Lacan's concept of desire for desire. Therefore, when Julian's desire leads her to her own soul as the source and the goal of her longing, the origin of the yearning that has brought her here has been clearly revealed.

That Julian's devotional search for God, for something that very much resembles Lacan's notion of the Thing, would lead her inevitably to look and apparently find the answer within her own soul seems to lend credence to Lacan's contention that desire for the Thing is ultimately, when traced to its root level, nothing other than desire for desire itself.²⁸

Ultimately, I assert that Julian's description of her longing for and apprehensions of her desired God, as well as her conclusion that what she has actually been seeking and desiring can be found within her own soul or psyche,

²⁷ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 124.

²⁸ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 309.

have something of value to contribute to Lacanian theory. Specifically, the experiences Julian recounts, and her interpretations of them, make an argument not only for the potential attainability of the desired object, but, more significantly, as far as Lacanian theory is concerned, for the positive effects of consistently following one's desire up to and beyond the boundaries of the Real. Žižek states of Lacan's formulation on chasing one's desire:

Even if the object of desire is illusory, there is a real in this illusion: the object of desire in its positive content is vain, but not the place it occupies, the place of the Real, which is why there is more truth in the unconditional fidelity to one's desire than in the resigned insight into the vanity of one's striving.²⁹

Thus, by relentlessly following one's desired Thing—the constantly morphing versions of God, in Julian's case—by refusing to give up on one's desire, one actually moves closer to recuperating the lost sense of wholeness that, according to Lacan, constitutes the gap at the centre of human experience. Through pursuing this unceasing course of desire, therefore, an individual, in some fashion, can begin to fill, or perhaps more accurately, to shrink or even reconstitute the hole that gapes in the middle of each subject's experience and psyche, and which is reflected at the very heart of language. No matter what shape or guise an individual's desired Thing might appear to (temporarily) assume—for instance that of the divine, in Julian's case—the actual result of one's commitment to follow one's search all the way to the end, can and usually does produce unexpected consequences. Labbie explains, 'As a subject bound to language, the sublimation of this desire, having occurred once in the form of

²⁹ Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, p. 133.

religious belief in God, doubles back on itself to believe in the possibility of the impossible word.’³⁰ Thus, by pursuing that which one desires faithfully and without prejudice as to the findings—whatever one believes or thinks one may be seeking, whatever identity one’s culture or gender or society affiliations or influences may have imposed upon the desire Thing—ultimately, according to Labbie’s interpretation of this Lacanian precept, it is the pure gap at the centre of language that one actually longs to fill through the attainment of one’s desire. Furthermore, whilst this rent may be technically irreparable, the closer one approaches it or returns to its site, is the more possible it becomes to believe in its recuperation, even if this would necessitate the acceptance, if not the utilisation, of a new linguistic paradigm that would be able to somehow utter the supposedly unutterable or describe the heretofore indescribable.

Despite the pull of such a potentially redeeming and fulfilling goal, which Lacan posits stems from a very central lack within each subject, people, both in medieval times, and in the contemporary era, more often than not choose to give up on their fundamental desire for what lies at the heart of the ontological gap in the psyche (reflected in language). They prefer instead to take refuge in the (rapidly proliferating) metonymy of empty diversions that so aid humankind in being mired in the pleasure principle, that numbing call to a safe and static inertia that counteracts true desire. Lacan’s assessment, in *Seminar VII*, of this ongoing and escalating situation, leads Holsinger to remark, that, “The future of desire... is apocalyptic... the logical outcome of the steadily “anesthetized” course of human desire since the twelfth century.’³¹

³⁰ Labbie, *Lacan’s Medievalism*, p. 222.

³¹ Holsinger, *Premodern Condition*, p. 92.

Whilst Julian's example of fidelity to her desire might have no practical effect upon the current state or projected course of human desire, it nonetheless offers commentary on and perhaps a case study of the potential benefits of radically and unstintingly continuing to pursue one's desire for the Thing. This could have the effect of helping to prove the theoretical endgame of Lacan's theory of desire—that, whilst following one's desire may not restore one to the original state of lost wholeness, it can nevertheless bring one closer and closer to one's own inner-residing order of the Real, in which both *jouissance* and a greater sense of truth (though most likely a mute, inexpressible one) awaits. Thus, the more one follows one's desire, is the nearer one draws to a definitive understanding or estimation of one's own psyche or self. Indeed, even the yearning for God which lies at the heart of the texts of Julian of Norwich, a medieval mystic, leads to the discovery that the beloved she has been seeking, the Thing being sought, in Lacanian terminology, is in effect not some external entity or deity, but actually a state or experience accessible within the human soul or psyche.

Indeed, Julian's writings suggest that, the further she pursued her desire, was the more that she experienced and benefitted from greater and greater instances of devotional affinity or shared understanding or even unitive states of *jouissance* with her sought beloved, a quantity which after all, she has discovered, resides, at least in part, within her. Therefore, Julian's case demonstrates that the drive towards and experience of Lacan's return to the Real can be realistically and serially attainable through relentlessly and unswervingly following one's desire for the Thing.

Before taking a closer look at what Julian's texts can potentially offer as validation for Lacan's formulation of desire, it will be useful briefly to point out that, in some sense, Lacan, himself, acknowledged that the pursuit of radical desire required great commitment and sacrifice. He also believed that any actual attainment of the sought Thing—in the form of an uninterrupted, permanent return to wholeness through an extended access to the Real, and the *jouissance* situated there—was, in a purely practical sense, technically impossible.

As far as the former contention, Lacan basically maintained that, since desire for the Thing represents, in actuality, a radical and unceasing pursuit of something beyond all representation, a return to that which predated an entry into language and thus society itself, which is based upon symbolic systems, then following this desire wherever it may lead, would require the subject's willingness to court the destruction of his or her own self-identity—as shaped through entry into language and interaction with it, in the form of the Symbolic and Imaginary orders—potentially resulting in her or his erasure from all meaningful discourse and thus societal participation. In fact, surrendering to desire of this sort, in Lacan's estimation, presents all manner of dangers for a subject. He expresses this opinion when he states, 'in order to reach *Das Ding* absolutely, to open the flood gates of desire, what [is]... on the horizon? In essence, pain.'³² Indeed, as he attests in his discussion of Antigone's refusal to back down upon her desire, as seen in chapter three of this thesis, Lacan contends that the relentless pursuit of desire for the Thing actually, in a sense, renders a subject 'inhuman' and even, in some way (at least from the

³² Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 80.

perspective of those who have given up on their radical desire), atrocious.³³

This is because, as Lacan explains:

Whoever enters the path of uninhibited *jouissance*, in the name of the rejection of the moral law in some form or other, encounters obstacles whose power is revealed to us every day in our experience in innumerable forms, forms that nevertheless perhaps may be traced back to a single root. We are, in fact, led to the point where we accept the formula that without a transgression there is no access to *jouissance*.³⁴

So, if an individual, such as Antigone and to a lesser extent Julian, follows her desire for the Thing wherever it may lead, it will inevitably, according to Lacan, lead this subject past all barriers of normative societal laws, which after all, exist in some part to preserve the Symbolic order and its regulating chain of signifiers. This, in his estimation has the potential to result in disruptive consequences for the one who has followed her desire for the Thing to such a radical and limit-breaking degree. Witness the consequences suffered by Antigone because of her own heroic refusal to back down from her ceaseless pursuit of the desired Thing.

Thus to Lacan, radical desire for the Thing requires an inordinate amount of commitment and sacrifice from those who hunt it. As Gilbert states of Lacan's position in this regard, "The "natural law" to which Antigone bears witness at the cost of her unbelievable life is only that desire is finally

³³ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 263.

³⁴ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 177.

autonomous, anti-social and destructive of its human host.'³⁵ Whilst Antigone admittedly represents an extreme example, her fate nevertheless does reflect Lacan's belief that the process of relentlessly following one's desire for the Thing could and usually does produce difficult, if not dire, circumstances for the desiring subject, due to its tendency to encourage one to transgress boundaries and eschew limits.

Despite this, Lacanian theory nevertheless is predicated upon each desiring subject persisting in her or his desire, in his or her own unique and individual way. And this is even though Lacan does not truly believe that a complete return to a sense of unity, which is encapsulated in the desired *Ding*, which resides in the order of the Real, is for all practical purposes attainable. Lacan expresses this position when he declares that the role of this desire 'is to make man always search for what he has to find again, but which he never will attain.'³⁶ The main reason which Lacanian thought offers to explain why desire for the Thing can never be truly realised consists in the fact that it situates this sought quantity or return to wholeness in the pre-linguistic space of the Real. As Gaunt says, '*jouissance*, by its very nature, is not recuperable because it belongs in the realm of the Real.'³⁷ It is located, therefore, in a place that lies beyond the limits of language, signification and thus human thought or communication. This very fact renders the Real and anything within its borders, for all practical purposes, from a Lacanian viewpoint, occluded to and beyond the verifiable reach and intelligible transmission of human beings.

³⁵ Gilbert, *Living Death*, p. 20.

³⁶ Lacan, *Ethics*, p. 68.

³⁷ Gaunt, *Love and Death*, p. 37.

DiCenso sums up this aspect of Lacan's conception of the Real, and thus everything it might contain, including the desired Thing, when he states, 'As that which is unsymbolized, the Real in itself is meaningless: it has no truth for human existence.'³⁸ Based on this interpretation of the Lacanian Real, even were a subject to traverse all boundaries of societal laws and transgress the limits of the realm of the Real, in pursuit of her or his desired Thing, s/he would still be denied the true attainment of her or his desired goal—the speculative or experienced *jouissance* inherent in a return to unity represented by the Thing. In fact, due to the opaque, non-linguistic nature of the Real, any forays across its borders could even be seen as, in essence, a removal of the subject from the representational structures that render human existence viable.

This impediment to the attainment of any meaningful engagement with or recuperation of one's desire in the realm of the Real, which is necessitated by the parameters imposed by the linguistic foundation of Lacanian tenets, places a seemingly insurmountable limit on the realisation of the goal at the centre of his theory of desire for the Thing—a return to the wholeness lost upon a subject's entry into language. Indeed, in large part because of this limitation produced by the inherent insufficiencies of language, which renders any meaningful attainment of the Thing virtually impossible, DiCenso concludes that, 'the subject is not a pre-given entity, not a "whole"... [And, therefore] the gap or lack inherent in human beings is not to be filled.'³⁹ Thus, due to the limitations of language, the proposed resolution that lies at the heart of Lacan's theory of desire for the Thing—the eventual recuperation of the originary sense

³⁸ DiCenso, 'Symbolism and Subjectivity', p. 54.

³⁹ DiCenso, 'Symbolism and Subjectivity', p. 60.

or state of pre-linguistic unity that was lost, after all, upon the subject's entry into the ranks of language—would seem to be, for all intents and purposes, effectively foreclosed.

Yet, despite the inescapable fact that the limits of language do currently render any expressible, comprehensive recuperation of the desired Thing (or the wholeness which it represents) impossible, the texts of Julian of Norwich seem to open up the possibility that, whilst still remaining unnameable, the predicated goal of Lacan's theory of desire is still actually, in some fashion—at least to one medieval mystical subject, attainable, or at the very least, well worth chasing. To begin with, Julian's texts appear to suggest that she actually has followed her desire for the Thing repeatedly, and that a primary, and perhaps even the overall, result has been the discovery that this sought quantity or experience exists within her own being, or as she refers to it, her soul—somewhere to which she can return again and again. Thus, with the establishment of this desire-drawn map that has led her to seek and find the Thing inside her own being or psyche, Julian can offer one example that Lacan's concept of desire, which leads to a return to the Real and attainment of the Thing, is far from destructive or impossible, but is in actuality positive and serially, if not permanently, attainable and sustainable.

Despite this apparent contradiction, Julian's manifestation of this aspect of Lacan's concept of desire for the Thing can, in actuality, help better to examine this element of Lacanian theory. This is because—as someone seeking to commune with God in a culture and era in which longing for something that was somehow unquantifiable, ineffable and yet metonymically representable (for instance in the form of the Trinity) was, if not wholly common, still more

prevalent and acceptable than in other times or societies—Julian would have been encouraged and able to follow her desire more faithfully and committedly than perhaps subjects from other periods or cultures would normally be. That Julian wrote an in-depth and serially evolutionary account of her pursuit of her radical desire offers an invaluable opportunity to examine this Lacanian formulation as it plays out in the life of a subject. By reading certain aspects of Julian and Lacan together, therefore, it is possible not only to learn more about what is transpiring in Julian's texts, but also to observe more closely a specific part of Lacanian theory manifesting, step-by-step and in detail.

One example of the utility of opening a dialogue between the works of Julian and the theory of Lacan exists in Julian's exemplification of the Lacanian concept of desire for desire, which can be seen in her arrival at the conclusion that God, her sought desired, can be found within her own soul. This, in effect, means that the desiring subject has been longing for her own soul, from whence the desire originally stemmed. This tracks very closely with the Lacanian formulation of desire for desire.

After all, since Lacan himself declared that desire for the Thing can also be characterised as desire for desire, something self-generated that emanates from within the individual's psyche, then tracing that desire back to its source should inevitably lead a subject back to the gap within, the root cause of desire for the Thing. Julian's self-described encounters with God or divinity in a place within her own psyche that she refers to as the soul suggest that, for her, such a return to the original state or sense of unity that Lacanian theory itself posits is eminently feasible.

Furthermore, in this instance, reading specific aspects of Julian's texts in conversation with particular elements of Lacan's theory opens the door to the possibility that this state of unity, towards which desire for the Thing leads, may actually be able to be articulated, in some fashion, even though it can only be experienced in the extra-linguistic realm of the Real. Indeed, whilst the subject's original experience of the lost wholeness represented by the desired Thing may have been confined to a pre-linguistic phase of subject formation, Julian's example suggests that this does not necessarily mean that—once this state has been re-experienced at a stage beyond an individual's entry into language—it remains forever fully beyond the scope of linguistic expression altogether. In fact, as McAvoy states, Julian's texts manage to 'provide an "intelligible verbal translation" of the ultimately extra-linguistic knowledge of *divine unity* to which she has been privy.'⁴⁰ That Julian is able to do this offers a valuable opportunity to look further and more closely at this aspect of Lacan's theory of desire, in the process possibly affording a view into the previously foreclosed realm of the Real.

In fact, Julian's texts, in some ways, are able to represent and communicate her version of the exact thing or Thing that Lacan's theory points towards. They comprehensibly express examples of the repeated and then somewhat sustained achievement of her desired Thing—in the form of realised devotion, expanded understanding and unitive *jouissance*. Julian's depictions of her apprehensions of her longed-for God affords the opportunity—when one takes into consideration the historically conditioned features inherent in her

⁴⁰ McAvoy, 'Writing Gender', p. 174.

interpretation and description—to witness one individual’s encounters with and understanding of her own version of Lacan’s desired Thing.

Julian’s portrayal of her repeated encounters with and, in some way, attainment of her yearned for God is summed up, in the very last chapter of her final word on the matter, her Long Text, in a revelation about the final meaning of her visions. This recognition, which has been characteristically and fittingly delivered to her from within, from the very source (and ultimately the goal) of her desire itself, answers her yearning to know the meaning of her spiritual odyssey in the following fashion:

What, woldest thou wit thy lordes mening in this thing? Wit it wele, love was his mening. Who shewed it the? Love. What shewid he the? Love. Wherefore shewed he it the? For love. Holde the therin, thou shalt wit more in the same. But thou shalt never wit therin other withouten ende (*Revelation*: 86.13-16).

In this way, Julian testifies that what she has experienced, time after time, through following her beloved divinity has, in fact been revealed to her to be something which she identifies as love. Furthermore, this love is not simply a passive state bestowed upon her by a removed God, but is also an actual motivating force that has—through the agency of love or longing itself—arisen from within her, directing and drawing her towards it. Julian concludes that, through intentionally continuing to focus on this love—this active longing—she, in turn, can continue to evoke it and draw it, in its form as the love which represents the goal of her longing, towards her. However—and Lacan would surely concur with this conclusion—Julian is assured that she can never ever

plumb the true depths or breadth of this love, because it (and the Lacanian Thing it so resembles) is made of and ultimately represents open-ended and limitless desire.

Thus, despite all of its seemingly disparate elements and perspectives, its devotional, intellectual and unitive components—in the final analysis Julian sums up her desired Thing as love (which in this case approximates very nearly in meaning to desire in the Lacanian sense) spawned by love, emanating from within and calling out to be fulfilled, drawing her inexorably towards the blissful realisation of this desire or love in the form of love itself. It would appear that this desired quantity, which Julian identifies as love has led and is continuing to lead her unerringly and inevitably back towards itself, towards, as she puts it, love. This offers a very near approximation to Lacan's concept of desire for desire.

In this portrayal of one woman's desire for the Thing, followed relentlessly and past all boundaries, leading to a return to that which has appeared to be most lacking at the core of her longing self or soul, Julian's texts provide a valuable means to more closely examine and explore Lacan's contention that relentlessly pursuing one's desire is actually a means to attempt to return to the originary wholeness which constitutes each individual's innate condition and birthright. Therefore, due to the exchange of ideas and apprehensions between certain aspects of the texts of Julian of Norwich and the theory of Jacques Lacan, we are able to gain not only a greater understanding of and accessibility to the thought and motivations of the late-medieval female mystic, but also to study further and in greater detail the formulations on desire posited by the twentieth-century psychoanalytical theorist.

Certainly, it is possible to view the purpose and ultimate aim of the radical search for desire that both of these individuals, from dissimilar times, cultures and life experiences, describe from (at least) two different vantage points—either in terms of Lacan’s definition of a somewhat futile attempt to chase one’s desire in order to try (unconsciously in most instances) to restore a lost sense of extra-linguistic wholeness, or from the perspective of Julian’s account of an upward spiralling, devotional journey towards utter absorption in love. However, no matter which interpretation one chooses, the fact remains that the desire (or love)—which, according to both Lacan and Julian, spawns, drives and ultimately represents the end of this human quest for fulfilment—leads, in each case (and perhaps in every case), back to the very place from which it originated, the subject’s very own longing self.

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